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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

CHARACTERISTICS OF A QUALITY LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN POST-
SECONDARY DISTANCE EDUCATION

BY

GISELLE GABOURY-SMITH



A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION.

IN

ADULT AND HIGHER EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF ADULT, CAREER AND TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

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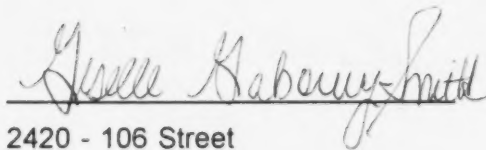
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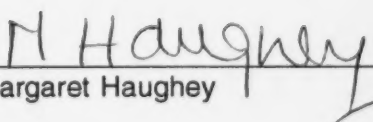
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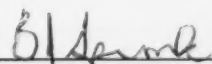
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EDUCATION in ADULT AND HIGHER EDUCATION.



Dave Collett



Margaret Haughey



Barbara Spronk

September 19, 1995

ABSTRACT

Distance education institutions committed to educational quality and the development of learners, need to understand quality from the learner's perspective. The focus of this study, therefore is on learners and their perceptions of a quality learning experience in post-secondary distance education. A qualitative research methodology was used in this study. This involved interviewing nine students from Athabasca University twice about their learning experiences. To assist in the data analysis the qualitative data analysis computer program called "Sonar" was employed. The findings of the study were grouped into three sections. The first section includes three major categories which deal with learners and their learning experience. These include learner motivations and expectations, the various processes and interactions of the learning experience, and finally, learners' reflections on their learning experience. The next section deals with the underlying conceptual themes which emerged from the data: the challenge of distance learning, learners assuming responsibility for their learning and wanting to control how occurs, and the personalized nature of distance learning. Out of this was synthesized the characteristics of a quality distance learning experience, within the context of this study. These focus upon the learner, the institution and their interactions. What this study shows is that the learning process, has a major impact upon learners' perceptions of a quality learning experience.

PREFACE

In a sense, he said, it's the student's choice of Quality that defines him. People differ about Quality, not because Quality is different, but because people are different in terms of experience.

Robert Pirsig

Zen and the Art of

Motorcycle Maintenance

(New York: Bantam Books, 1974)

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I: STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM	1
Introduction	1
Research Problem	4
Problem Statement	5
Research Questions	5
Assumptions	6
Limitations	6
Delimitations	6
Significance of the Study	7
 CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW	 9
Quality in Higher Education and Distance Education	9
Why is Quality an Issue?	10
Quality Approaches	11
What is Quality?	13
Stakeholders in Education	15
Assessment of Quality	16
Quality in Distance Education	17
Quality Learning and the Learning Experience	19
Quality Learning	19
Educational Orientation	20
Conceptions of Learning	21
Approaches to Learning	22
Assessment of Quality Learning	23
Quality Learning Experience	27
Student Satisfaction	28
Assessment of Quality Learning Experience	31
Quality Learning Experience in Distance Education	32
Summary	35

CHAPTER III: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY	36
Introduction	36
Research Methodology	37
Research Site	38
Participant Selection	38
Research Strategies	41
Data Collection	41
Data Collection Method	41
Participant Selection Process	42
Data Collection Process	43
Data Analysis	46
Study Trustworthiness	49
Credibility	49
Triangulation	50
Peer Debriefing	50
Member Checks	50
Transferability	50
Dependability	51
Confirmability	51
Ethical Considerations	51
Summary	52
 CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS OF THE STUDY	 53
Introduction	53
The Learner and the Learning Experience	54
Learner Factors	54
Portraits	54
Learner Motivations	58
Expectations of Athabasca University	63
The Learning Experience: Processes and Interactions	65
Interactions with Staff	65

Learner-tutor Relationships	67
Interactions with Learning Materials	76
Learner Assessment and Feedback	82
Reflections on the Learning Experience	86
Learner Maturity	86
Preferred Ways of Learning	87
Personal Learnings	93
Emerging Themes	97
Challenge of Distance Learning	97
Learner Responsibility and Control of their Learning	98
Personalized Nature of Distance Learning	100
Characteristics of a Quality Learning Experience	101
CHAPTER V: SUMMARY AND REFLECTIONS	103
Summary	103
Implications for Practice	106
Implications for Learners	106
Implications for Institutions	107
Implications for Further Research	113
Personal Reflections	117
BIBLIOGRAPHY	120
APPENDICES:	
Appendix A: Interview Guides	129
Appendix B: Letter of Introduction	132
Appendix C: Learner Profile	133
Appendix D: Participant Agreement Form	135
Appendix E: Transcript Validation Letter	136

CHAPTER 1

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Introduction

The issue of quality in higher education and distance education has always been of concern, but in recent years has taken on increased importance. This is being driven by the social, economic, political and technological changes taking place in society. While there is a lot of discussion and interest in quality higher education, there is a lack of understanding and conflicting views about what it means. Barnett (1992) notes, that "quality" has become a key word in the public debate about higher education, yet there is no "indication that people have a clear sense of what quality is or might be" (p.1). This is particularly true of post-secondary distance education where the studies have tended to focus on the quality of particular arrangements or technologies rather than the broader educational experience and processes.

The debate about quality shows that there are alternative conceptions about higher education. This is reflected in some of the pressures facing educational systems. These include:

- a) the view of higher education as a crucial partner in the country's future economic and social development (Haughey, 1993); (This has meant that higher education has shifted from an emphasis as a cultural apparatus of society to becoming more a part of the economic apparatus).
- b) the shift from higher education being a personal/individual good to having a wider societal value (Barnett, 1992, p.5);
- c) expansion of access and participation rates in higher education which in turn gives rise to the issue of;
- d) accountability, where the efficiency and effectiveness of the educational

systems become of concern due to financial constraints (Murgatroyd and Woudstra, 1989; DeWeert, 1990; Simpson, 1993).

These issues are interrelated and impact to varying degrees all educational systems including distance education. In Alberta, the debate has resulted in the government embarking upon a strategic planning process to transform the province's adult learning system (Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development, 1994).

Quality in higher education is a relative and multidimensional concept. Burrows and Harvey (1992) note that quality is relative as its definition varies according to which aspect or dimension of the higher education process is focused upon, who is doing the assessment, and for what purpose. It is multidimensional in that it varies in relation to the purposes of the perceiver, varies over time and between subject disciplines (Chambers, 1992, p.23).

Higher education has various stakeholders who have differing views on educational quality. These stakeholders can affect what issues are brought to the forefront, and influence the direction of education because of particular ideas on the purposes of education. As a result of this, they also define and assess quality in education differently.

The primary stakeholders in higher education, including distance education are; government or funding bodies, the academic community, and market forces which include employers and students. Each stakeholder has their own perspective on quality which are based upon differing values. Funding bodies are primarily concerned with quality as it relates to effectiveness and efficiency. The academic community tends to focus on research and publications with a concern for peer review. In the market, which includes employers and students, the employer seems to dominate. This means that quality generally is

defined as the development of qualified human resources. Nunan (1993a) states that because there are multiple stakeholders, the appraisal of quality "becomes a complex issue where the focus inevitably falls upon who has power and how these powers are applied in legitimating a particular view" (p.489). This leaves students in a relatively weak position, with the quality of their educational experience and development receiving little serious attention.

Yet as various authors note, it is the learner's educational experience which should be of primary concern to all stakeholders no matter what their views on the purposes of higher education.

Whatever else we may be interested in, whether in the success of graduates securing employment or in widening access, or in the value of research, there remains at the heart of higher education the individual student, his or her educational development, and the quality of that development. If there is a unifying idea it is this. Quality in higher education and its improvement, can not be understood without attention to it. (Barnett, 1992, p.62)

Other educators offer similar opinions to Barnett. Baird (1988) defines quality in education as the development of independent learners. Bardbury (1991) as quoted in McIlroy and Walker (1993), argues that the "fundamental criterion of quality must be value to the learner" (p.42). Muller and Funnell (1992b, 1993) consider it important that quality be defined in terms of the longer term impact that education and training will have on the learner. While all are slightly different, what is common is the centrality of the learner in education. In this study, learners and the quality of their educational experience will be the focus.

With regard to distance education, Murgatroyd and Woudstra (1989) note that in a competitive marketplace, distance educators need to focus on service and

quality. This means that distance education needs to be concerned with students' perception of quality as they are the ones who attribute value to the service or product provided. Henderikx (1993) in discussing quality in distance education says that "linking academic curricula and courses to the marketplace is even more imperative in the case of adult students than in the case of conventional students " (p.37). Traditionally in distance education, judgements about the value or quality of education have been made by academic staff and course designers (McIlroy and Walker, 1993). "Within higher education there is a strong tradition to consider values and worth as judgements which can be made by those engaged in the education of students" (Nunan, 1991, p.389). This has meant that quality is generally defined by the institution, with more concern for organizational specifications than for learner needs. Educational institutions, committed to quality, need to change their emphasis so that the quality of the learner's experience becomes central. Muller and Funnell (1993), Race (1993), and McIlroy and Walker (1993) indicate the importance of examining quality from the learner's perspective. To understand and improve quality means viewing learners as active partners in learning. Yet little is known of what quality means to students in distance education. As noted by Nunan (1991), "apart from the study by Viljoen, Holt and Petzall (1990), which is concerned with student perceptions about quality, the other studies consider quality from the viewpoint of those who manage or advise upon distance education as an enterprise" (p.388).

Research Problem

The literature on quality in distance education indicates that there is a lack of knowledge and understanding about learning processes and experiences as they relate to quality. Research has tended to focus on particular educational technologies and measurable outcomes rather than the experience of learning. But as Barnett (1992) says "there is a logical connection between the development of worthwhile states of mind and the experiences and educational

processes to which students are exposed in their courses" (p.16). Fenwick (1992) notes that quality in distance education starts with the individual learner, with an emphasis on the process not just the content of learning. An educational experience is complex and dynamic by nature, influenced by many different variables. This research is concerned with all those things which influence the quality of a student's learning experience. This means that the learning process and the factors which influence it, including inputs, context and outcomes will be examined. They all affect how learners evaluate the quality of a learning experience.

Problem Statement

From the perspective of post-secondary distance learners, what are the characteristics of an ideal quality learning experience?

Research Questions

There a number of research questions which further elaborate and develop the problem statement.

1. In what way do individual learner factors and personal frames of reference influence the quality of the learning experience?
2. How do identified institutional factors influence the quality of the learning experience?
3. How do the interactions between the learner and the institution affect the quality of the learning experience?

In this research learners were asked to look beyond what they were experiencing, to what a quality learning experience "should be". Sallis and Hingley (1991) state we need to know what things are being done well, what there needs to be more of, and what needs to be improved.

Assumptions

Assumptions are statements that the researcher assumes to be true but are not actually verified. One assumption in this study is that individual learners are able to reflect upon their actions and will disclose, to the best of their abilities, their thoughts, feelings and insights. It is also assumed that the learning experience is both cognitive and affective. Through the educational process individuals change and develop at the intellectual and personal level. Related to this is the assumption that it is positive if the learner, through the learning experience, comes to some deeper meaning and understanding of the world and their personal realities. Learners can identify quality aspects of their learning experience.

Limitations

Limitations refer to "limiting conditions or restrictive weakness" (Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman, 1987, p.23) of the research study. This study will be done by only one researcher, which means that it is limited by the researcher's abilities and personal perceptions. To deal with this a number of mechanisms have been built into the study, including peer review, member checks and the researcher noting personal reflections in a research journal. Another limitation is that interviews will be the primary method used to collect the data for this study. Associated with this is that the study will be limited by the participants abilities to recall and express their perceptions, feelings, experiences and their ability to reflect on these experiences.

Delimitations

Delimitations means defining the boundaries of the study, what will be excluded or not dealt with. This study will be delimited to nine participants who have a

variety of characteristics. These students may not reflect or be representative of all students at Athabasca University. Through the use of multiple interviews with a limited number of participants, the researcher hopes to obtain an indepth understanding of the learning experience. A second delimitation concerns the context of the situation. The results of this study may not apply to distance learners in environments different from this study. Quality is a relative concept which varies according to the context. To enable readers of the study to make judgements about the transferability of the results, rich descriptions of the research context and interpretations will be provided. Also, this study will be done at the macro level of the educational experience. It will not give specific information about individual courses or curricula.

Significance of the Study

In understanding what quality in distance education means, it is necessary to focus on, the adult learner, those individuals most affected and to understand their needs and expectations. Cookson (1989), Murgatroyd (1993) and McIlroy and Walker (1993) all note that most of the research on learners in distance education has focused on specific distance education methods and student outcomes. "Yet to be examined in detail is the nature of the adult learning process, which attends the generation of outcomes in distance education" (Cookson, 1989, p.31).

Morgan (1990) goes on to say that the dominant research methods in distance education still tend to be within the quantitative paradigm, i.e. experimental and correlational studies. To understand learning from the learner's perspective requires a qualitative approach. "It is essential to place the learner at the centre of the evaluation processes and outcomes by focusing on qualitative approaches to exploring a learner's perceptions of quality" (Muller and Funnell, 1993, p.31). This study will be using qualitative methodologies, so it should

provide a more indepth understanding of learner's perceptions of a quality learning experience. Quality is about nuance and subtle, unique differences. It comes through when individuals provide detailed, indepth, and holistic descriptions of the situation (Patton, 1990, p.109). Barnett (1992), who favours qualitative approaches, succinctly states that "the quality of higher education, like the quality of wine, can not be adequately described in numbers" (p. 54).

While there has been some research on adult learning in distance education, there is very little concerning learner's perceptions of quality learning and the characteristics of a quality learning experience. Some articles have been written about the topic, but limited research studies identified.

Post-secondary distance education organizations that are truly committed to providing quality education, need to take a learner centred approach and ask "how students understand quality in their education experience" (Chaffee and Sherr, 1992, p.82). This study will contribute to the understanding of what quality distance learning means, which "can be best achieved by an emphasis on the individual learner" (Fenwick, 1992, p.8).

The first section of this thesis introduced the research topic studied, specified the research problem and subproblems, and noted study assumptions, limitations, delimitations and significance. The next part of this thesis provides a review of relevant literature, followed by an indepth discussion of the research design and methodology, a discussion of the study findings, concluding with a summary and reflections on the study.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is done primarily to identify the scope, range, intent and type of research that has been done previously. This provides a context for the study and its research significance. The purpose of the literature review is not to do an exhaustive survey of the literature but to provide "logical and empirical support" (Rudestam and Newton, 1992, p.47) for the arguments that the researcher puts forward in this study.

This review covers two general areas, quality in higher education and distance education, and quality of learning and the learning experience. A third section concerning the learner and learning in distance education is also important to this study. It will not be summarized in this literature review though, since what is applicable emerged during the data analysis and interpretation phases. Relevant literature will be noted in Chapter V as it relates to the implications of the study. It was felt that too indepth a review could have unduly influenced the initial data collection and analysis process (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992 and Strauss and Corbin, 1987).

Quality in Higher Education and Distance Education

This first section of the literature review will provide the broader, more general context of quality in higher education and distance education. To begin with, some of the trends and issues facing higher education and distance education will be explored. Following this, there will be a brief overview of alternative definitions of quality, how the different stakeholders in education view quality and how it has been evaluated. Part of this review will include a look at how distance education systems are responding to concerns about quality.

Why is Quality an Issue?

There has been a recent upsurge of interest in quality in higher education in North America, Western Europe, and the Australian and South Pacific/Asia region. This is evidenced by the proliferation of articles and books written on the subject. The 1980s and 1990s showed a noticeable shift in how governments and society viewed the role of higher education institutions. Barnett (1992) notes that in the past higher education was a system which was essentially a cultural apparatus of society, valued for its intrinsic properties, of personal and positional good that was enjoyed by a limited number of individuals. Now "increasingly, they are expected to make a contribution to economic, social and cultural progress" (Green, 1993, p.5). This is the result of the type and rate of change taking place in society. There is the increasing pace of technological innovation, major world political changes, and the movement towards a globalized economy occurring at the same time as many countries are dealing with high levels of unemployment and economic recession. How this affects the quality of higher education is summarized by Green (1993). While the points she raises are about European countries, they are equally applicable to what is occurring in Canada. Similar points are noted in a White Paper introduced in 1994 by the Alberta government, entitled "Adult Learning: Access Through Innovation".

(1) There is a widespread concern with the size of public expenditure and higher education's share of it. This is also a concern of federal and provincial governments in Canada. In 1993-94 the province of Alberta introduced major reductions in government spending, whose impact on our educational systems are only beginning to be felt.

(2) There has been a significant increase in participation rates in higher education. To deal with this, the number of educational institutions have grown and the established ones have undergone expansion. Athabasca University, the study research site, saw their student population increase from 3,466 in 1979-80 to 12,023 in 1992-93. This raises the difficult issue of trying to meet

expanding demand while dealing with budgetary constraints.

(3) There has been a call for educational institutions to be more accountable to government and society. Accountability involves rendering some form of account that an activity is being carried out effectively and efficiently. Murgatroyd and Woudstra (1989) state that "governments, private donors and the clients of distance education seek accountable organizations" (p.8). For providers of the financial resources, particularly the government, the focus is upon the efficient use of resources. In the case of those affected by education, the concern is with educational effectiveness.

In response to the demands for educational accountability, Haughey (1993) and DeWeert (1990) note two alternative positions. One seeks greater control and regulation of educational systems. This would seem to be what is occurring in most western European countries, where quality control systems for higher education are in the process of development (DeWeert, 1990, p.57). The other alternative is for educational institutions to reorganize themselves to enable them to be more responsive to change. DeWeert (1990) suggests moving to a market system "in which competition amongst institutions and amongst students determine the structure of the system and the allocation of resources" (p.57). Related to this, is a recommendation that educational institutions adopt and commit themselves to quality assurance and management systems. Haughey (1993) and Murgatroyd and Woudstra (1989) support such initiatives for distance education institutions.

Quality Approaches

Conceptions of quality have emerged from the private industrial sector and in the last ten years have begun to be applied to all sectors of education and training. Muller and Funnell (1993) indicate that two dominant approaches to the delivery of quality have emerged. Of course these approaches are not

mutually exclusive and their application will vary somewhat depending upon the organizational context. The first approach, quality control, has already been mentioned. It "concerns itself with processes and procedures of quality audit and the creation of quality standards which are fully and explicitly documented" (Muller and Funnell, 1993, p.29). Quality is inspected in after the fact to see if the product or service passes minimum pre-defined standards. Haughey (1993) says that in education the dominant forms of assessment, number of graduates, drop out rate, academic achievement, faculty publication rates etc. would fall within this category. "Such a system is based on the presupposition that the actual practices are those most likely to achieve the desired outcomes, and all that is necessary to ensure the maintenance of the outcome is some form of quality control" (p.10). While such systems may have had their value in the past, they can no longer meet the demands being placed upon educational institutions (Murgatroyd and Woudstra, 1989 and Haughey, 1993).

The second dominant approach to ensuring educational quality involves a comprehensive organizational philosophy committed to the pursuit of quality improvement. It is generally called total quality management but some organizations use the terms quality improvement or quality service. Total quality management (TQM) is essentially "concerned with customer-focused organizational improvement, achieved through the activities of employees at various levels in the structure" (Taylor and Hill, 1993, p.21). Central to TQM is the concept of continuous improvement and the customer defining quality. Also, quality management goes beyond concerns with outputs and focuses on the processes involved in providing the good or service (McIlroy and Walker, 1993) and shifts the focus from teaching to learning (Chaffee and Sherr, 1991).

In reviewing the literature, it would appear that a significant number of authors are of the opinion that total quality management shows the most promise to fully affect the quality of education because of its client-centred focus. In

educational terms this could be equated with a "learner-centred approach which takes into account individual differences and the learner's stage of development in psychosocial and intellectual terms (McIlroy and Walker, 1993, p.46). It is important to realize that total quality management is a method to implement the organization's vision and confront organizational challenges. Educational organizations still need to examine what quality is, how it will be determined and who will be involved in the process.

What is Quality?

In applying concepts of quality to education there is considerable debate about what quality is. Harvey and Green (1993) have grouped together differing conceptions of quality as applied in higher education and have identified five discrete but interrelated ways of thinking about quality. Quality can be viewed as exceptional, perfection, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformative. These conceptions are worth a brief mention because they occur so frequently in the literature.

Quality as exceptional is when quality is considered something special. This includes traditional notions of quality where it is associated with something special or exclusive, with excellence or meeting absolute standards.

Quality as perfection means seeing it in terms of consistency or prevention rather than inspection. Two interrelated ideas encompassed by this are zero defects, where perfection is delivered consistently, and getting things right the first time, which means everyone in the organization involved with the product or process is responsible for quality.

The third conception of quality, fitness for purpose, is the extent to which a product or service fits its purpose. Fitness for purpose "raises the issue of whose purpose and how is fitness assessed" (Harvey and Green, 1993, p.17).

There are two alternative methods of specifying purpose, from the customer perspective, that is meeting their requirements, and from the provider by fulfilling the institution's mission. Sallis and Hingley (1991) call these "quality in fact" which is based upon the producer specifications and "quality in perception" which looks at quality from the consumer's viewpoint.

The fourth idea of quality is concerned with value for money. This concept is associated with the notion of accountability, particularly as it relates to governments, who link quality of education with value for money.

The last conception is quality as transformative, which involves qualitative change. Education in this sense is "not a service for a customer but an ongoing process of transformation of the participant, be it student or researcher" (Harvey and Green, 1993, p.24). This transformative concept of quality encompasses the ideas of enhancing the consumer and empowering the consumer. In enhancing the consumer, a quality education means one that changes the participant, where the educational experiences enhance the student's knowledge, skills and abilities. This could also be called a "value-added" notion of quality. The second component of transformative quality, involves empowering students to influence their own transformation. Empowering the learner is more than just being accountable to them as consumers but involving them in all aspects of the process of education. Harvey and Green feel that empowerment lies at the centre of developing a quality culture in education.

Harvey and Green (1993) conclude that quality is a relative concept in that definitions of quality vary depending upon the different perspectives of individuals and society. In this sense quality is "stakeholder relative".

For example, the focus of attention for students and lecturers might be on the process of education while

the focus of employers might be on the outputs of education. It is not possible, therefore to talk about quality as a unitary concept; quality must be defined in terms of a range of qualities. At best, perhaps we should define as clearly as possible the criteria that each stakeholder uses when judging quality and for these competing views to be taken into account when assessment of quality is undertaken. (Harvey and Green, 1993, p.28)

Stakeholders in Education

The stakeholders in education, the government, professional bodies, employer groups, students and society at large have different perceptions of quality which represent differences in values. As a result of this they also assess quality differently. This makes the appraisal of quality a complex issue which as noted by Nunan (1993b) is influenced by relative power of each of the stakeholders. Barnett (1992) states emphatically that "the debate over quality in higher education should be seen for what it is: a power struggle where the use of terms reflects a jockeying for position in the attempt to impose one's own definitions of higher education" (p.6).

In quality improvement systems, the customers needs are of central importance. McIlroy and Walker (1993) and Fenwick (1991) state that the customer as receiver and user of education is the one who attributes value to it. Because the students are the ultimate consumer of education, we should be concerned with their perceptions of quality. This does not mean that other stakeholders' conceptions of quality and criteria for judging it should not be taken into account by educational institutions. However, to date, the learner's perspective has received little serious attention or research. Higher education institutions have difficulty with seeing students as customers or beneficiaries of

the educational process (Chaffee and Sherr, 1991 and Harris, 1992). This is because students are often viewed as the inputs to the process or outputs when they graduate. In this view of higher education the educational experience of students is neglected, unless there is something wrong with the output (Barnett, 1992). "Some faculty cannot see the student as someone who can competently express his or her educational needs and justifiably insist that those needs be met" (Chaffee and Sherr, 1991, p.80). While academics may debate if students are the best individuals to determine what quality is (Green, 1993) or judge their experience (Barnett, 1992), how can the quality of education be improved if we do not understand it from their perspective? The learner after all is a major stakeholder and partner in the educational process, and plays an important role in determining the quality of education.

Assessment of Quality

Related to the issue of stakeholders in education, is how the quality of education has been traditionally assessed. Higher education has tended to focus its assessment on the inputs and outputs of education rather than the process. Barnett (1992) states that quality assessment, informed by a systems approach, is primarily external to the process of higher education. Lindsay (1992) calls this a "production-measurement" view in which education is seen as a simple system or production model of inputs, processes and outputs. Such approaches to assessment focus on those aspects easiest to define and measure (Lindsay, 1992, DeWeert, 1990) which in distance education means the products of their operations (McIlroy and Walker, 1993). But as noted by Haughey (1993) such methods are more about maintaining the status quo by improving the effectiveness of the institution rather than quality improvement. Nunan (1993a) expands on this idea further. He states that in such situations the institution has already determined that what it is doing is "worthwhile" and to achieve quality simply means ensuring that there is some level of goal achievement.

If educational institutions are interested in quality improvement and the educational development of students, they need to reevaluate what they accept as worthwhile. This means a concern for both the educational process and with the student's educational experience. Quality evaluation methods should not only focus on the inputs and products of education, but also evaluate the process of education.

Quality in Distance Education

So how does the above discussion relate to quality in distance education? Many of the issues concerning quality of higher education are also relevant to distance education. As Nunan (1993a) states "what is meant by quality of education and the quality of distance education will overlap and have linked meanings" (p.487). Quality in distance education is also influenced to some degree by the context and particular characteristics of distance education, students and educators. Garrison (1989) indicates that the essential criteria of distance education are:

1. Distance education implies that the majority of educational communication between (among) teacher and student(s) occurs noncontiguously.
2. Distance education must involve two-way communication between (among) teacher and student(s) for the purpose of facilitating and supporting the educational process.
3. Distance education uses technology to mediate the necessary two-way communication. (p.6)

Also, the adult learners who participate in distance education may have different characteristics from conventional university students. These differences include: the amount of time available for study due to the multiple roles (family member, employee, volunteer etc.) that they have; educational motives and goals; previous experiences with formal education; and work

experience (Henderikx, 1992). This makes them a rather heterogeneous group which means that distance education institutions must be innovative and flexible to meet their unique needs.

Concepts of quality in distance education are certainly no less complex than those of other forms of education. But given this, there has been very little written about quality in distance education (Murgatroyd and Woudstra, 1989 and McIlroy and Walker, 1993). The last few years have seen an increase in the literature on quality in distance education, most of it coming from Australia and the South Pacific regions and to some extent from Europe. This seems to be in response to the reorganization of their educational systems. At a Australian and South Pacific External Studies Association (ASPESA) 1991 conference on "Quality in Distance Education", Atkinson et al. (1991) noted that the conference theme was developed in "response to growing institutional and government interest in improving the quality of distance education, especially in the context of increased demand and limited resources" (p.v). This is an issue for most educational institutions.

Nunan (1991) identifies two fundamental problems with the literature about quality in distance education. First, is that writers tend to focus upon a particular education methods or student outcomes, rather than take a more comprehensive view of quality. Even at the ASPESA conference, Atkinson et al. (1991) noticed an increasing number of papers on technology. Both Atkinson et al. (1991) and Nunan (1991) are concerned about this concentration on the quality of technology because it is possible for distance education and its quality to be identified with a particular technology rather than the quality of the learning experiences provided. In this case "improving the quality of education is often simplified to a consideration of how technology has either generated new techniques for teaching or learning or enhanced the effectiveness of a particular technique" (Nunan, 1993a, p.488).

The second concern Nunan (1991) has with the literature is that the research often does not address the issue of value considerations as it relates to judgements of quality. This is because many of the studies are written from the perspective of those who manage distance education. There are certainly other legitimate stakeholders in distance education whose perspectives on quality need to be explored. Nunan and Calvert (1992) argue that distance education must now focus on quality for whom and in whose interests. Such value laden quality issues are much more difficult to define and measure than tangible outputs. But to deal the increasing demands being placed upon them and improve the quality of education, distance education institutions must challenge the way they have traditionally operated. "It is clear that quality considerations for distance education systems will encompass a complex array of factors and processes, as they are in the interesting position of offering their clients both a product (good) and a service" (McIlroy and Walker, 1993, p.43).

Quality Learning and the Learning Experience

In this section of the review, literature concerning quality learning, quality and the learner and the learning experience will be explored. The focus of this study of course, is on the broader concept of the learner's overall learning experience. Within this though, it is also necessary to understand quality learning, which is influenced by the learner's perspective and the learning experience.

Quality Learning

Higher education has tended to focus on the retaining of factual knowledge (Ramsden, 1986) or the development of marketable knowledge and skills, versus the ability to understand and think critically, or develop habits of independent intellectual inquiry (Ramsden, 1986). Boot and Hodgson (1987) in discussing assumptions about learning, would characterize this as

dissemination orientation and development orientation. In dissemination, knowledge is conceived of as a valuable commodity, where learning becomes a process of acquiring facts and skills. The purpose of education then is to make knowledge available to those who do not have it, analogous to "filling the empty vessel". For the developmental orientation, learning is a process of "engaging with, and attributing meaning to the world, including self in it" (Boot and Hodgson, 1987, p.6). In this case, the purpose of education is seen as the development of the whole person.

What is meant by quality learning is influenced by our values and what we see as the fundamental aims of education. In this study, quality learning is based primarily upon the developmental approach in which the intellectual and personal capabilities of the learner are developed. The focus is on the process and not just the outcomes of learning. Such a concept is supported by both Barnett (1991,1992) and Ramsden (1986) who have done extensive writing on quality learning. Yet as noted by Snell, Hodgson and Mann (1987), the dissemination orientation still tends to dominate distance learning.

While educational institutions have different definitions and ways of influencing learning quality, learners also come with different perspectives. Morgan (1993) suggests that to understand learning from the learner's perspective requires an exploration of five dimensions of the student's experience. These are orientation to learning, conceptions of learning, approaches to learning, outcomes of learning and students' change and development, and organizational constraints and the assessment system.

Educational Orientation

Educational orientation, also called student goals, provides an understanding of why students are taking a particular course of study and what are their expectations. Through knowledge of students' educational orientation,

"institutions should be able to relate them to other student characteristics and the curriculum to improve the educational process" (Stark, Shaw and Lowther, 1989, p.1). Morgan (1993) categorizes educational orientation into three primary variations: vocational, academic and personal. A fourth variation, social is more applicable to full time conventional university students rather than distance education students. A number of typologies based upon orientation have been developed, for example Katchadourian and Boli (1985) as noted in Stark, Shaw and Lowther (1989). An understanding of educational orientation has application for distance learning. Holt, Petzall and Viljoen (1993) used orientation as one of eight areas of student attributes to help them better understand the MBA experience in a distance learning program at an Australian university. In this study, they said that orientation "is the quality relationship between student and course rather than a quality inherent in the student" (p.17). Educational orientation, which Morgan (1993) calls "holistic motivation" forms the background for how students approach learning.

Conceptions of Learning

Morgan (1993) in his discussion of student's conceptions of learning, refers to the work of Roger Saljo (1982), who identified five distinct conceptions of learning. These are: learning as the increase of knowledge, learning as memorizing, learning as the acquisition of facts, procedures, etc., which can be retained and/or utilized in practice, learning as abstraction of meaning, and learning as interpretative process aimed at the understanding of some personal reality (p.62). The first three conceptions of learning are concerned with the memorization and retention of information, while the last two are concerned with the abstraction of meaning and insights into understanding reality.

Recent research on learning has noted an additional level of change, where learning is transformative, with an emphasis on personal change and development. The works of Mezirow (1985) and Garrison (1992) are concerned

with this type of learning. Harvey and Green (1993) in discussing the different ways of defining quality in higher education, note one view where quality is considered transformative. In this definition, quality is "rooted in the notion of 'qualitative change', a fundamental change of form" (p.24). Education is an ongoing process of transformation of the learner, in which the learner is enhanced and empowered. Studies seem to indicate that students perceptions of learning do change over time and they seem to go through a developmental process.

Approaches to Learning

Conceptions of learning are about "what" learning is seen as, while learning approaches are "how" students engage in learning. Ramsden (1986) feels that the approach to learning is decisive in explaining the quality of learning in relation to various learning activities. There has been a considerable amount of research done into approaches to learning. A discussion of some of the primary research is found in Marton et al. (1984), a key source for understanding the learning experience. The research has shown that students tend to adopt two contrasting learning styles, surface versus deep. A surface approach involves memorizing facts and information, where the student reproduces what he or she has experienced. The intention is to complete the learning task requirements. In contrast, a deep approach involves searching for meaning, in that students attempt to develop personal insights from their learning experiences. The intention here is to understand. "The importance of the approach to learning is that it is directly linked to the quality of the learning outcomes" (Morgan, 1993, p.72). Students who take a surface approach to various learning contexts do not obtain a good grasp of content and concepts, whereas those who take a deep approach gain a fuller understanding of the concepts and issues.

Marton and Saljo's (1984) research into approaches to learning, found that

there is a relationship between deep approaches to learning and conceptions of learning which involve a better understanding of reality. The same relationship is true between taking a surface approach to learning and conceptions of learning consisting of the memorization and retention of information. These concepts are similar to the developmental and dissemination assumptions of learning discussed previously. Marton and Saljo (1984) also noted that there is a circular relation between approach to learning and motivation to learn. "Intrinsic motivation (interest) seems to lead to a deep approach and extrinsic motivation (concern with demands) to a surface approach" (p.52).

Students' learning approaches are also influenced by the demands made upon them. Ramsden (1986) says that qualitative differences in the outcomes of learning are impacted by the approach to learning, the content and the context of the learning situation. "This theory of student learning implies that we should give our sharpest attention to setting the right kinds of learning tasks, providing the right kind of teaching support, and assessing the outcomes of learning in appropriate ways" (Ramsden, 1986, p. 114).

Assessment of Quality Learning

The assessment of quality student learning can take place at two levels, the individual student and institutional level. Ramsden (1986) argues that inappropriate assessment methods at the individual student level, which emphasize minimalistic, reproductive learning strategies have implications for poor quality student learning (p.111). When assessment is concerned with maintaining specific student standards and selection, it focuses on the products rather than the processes of student learning, and in doing so does not encourage true learning. Importance should be placed on what the student makes of learning rather than what is learned. Frazer (1992) in writing about quality assurance in higher education, has developed characteristics of quality

learning. They include such things as; love and respect for scholarship, desire to know more about the subject, knowing how to learn, realization that learning is a lifelong process, problem solving or opportunity taking, formulating an argument, communication skills, and critical analysis. It is interesting to note that this list of knowledge, skills and attitudes is what teachers hope their students can achieve. So while these characteristics are what quality learning should be for the learner, it would seem that they were developed from the teacher's perspective.

At the institutional level, quantitative measures of quality have tended to predominate, where such factors as academic achievement, number of honour degrees and student drop out and completion rates have been used. But "qualitative approaches represent an equally valid paradigm for assessing quality" (Kuh, 1981, p.1). Barnett (1991) also feels that quantitative approaches to assessing quality have limitations and that there is a need to place the learner at the centre of the educational institution as a whole. "What we need... are indicators that a concern for the quality of student learning is built into the internal life of the institution" (p.50).

To assess the quality of learning Race (1993) formulated a list of twelve criteria of what the institution can do to promote quality student learning. These criteria have been categorized into a "wanting, doing, feedback and digesting" model of learning.

1. Wanting involves three criteria based upon whether the "want" to learn is enhanced through course documentation, teaching methods, and assignments.
2. Doing is concerned with how students are encouraged to learn more actively by "doing". The three criteria are if learners are shown how to apply rather than just memorize ideas/concepts, given an understanding of the benefits of active learning, and

allowed to learn by trial and error.

3. Feedback criteria are concerned with what and how feedback is given, if there are opportunities for peer feedback, and if students are shown how to seek and use feedback constructively.

4. Digesting is about making sense of what has been learned.

Criteria include if learners are encouraged to reflect on what they have learned, if the courses are structured so students understand theories and concepts, and students are encouraged to engage in dialogue with each other.

Muller and Funnell (1991) have proposed five broad criteria which they feel will lead to quality in vocational education and can be generalized to other areas of education and training. "All these focus specifically on the learner and the role which he or she plays in determining the product of learning and in contributing to the process of transformation" (Muller and Funnell, 1993, p.30). The five criteria are:

- a) quality recognizes the centrality of the learner in attaining successful learning outcomes;
- b) to some extent the learner must take ownership of the learning process;
- c) the learner has some responsibility for determining the style and mode of delivery of learning;
- d) the learner must participate outside the formal structured learning context in the process of learning; and
- e) the learner innovates, experiments and learns from failure as well as success.

The criteria proposed by both Race (1993) and Muller and Funnell (1991) have a managerial focus, in that they are concerned with how to promote and evaluate quality student learning. A true learner centred approach to education though, means exploring learners' perceptions of quality learning. The learner

should be placed at the centre of the assessment of learning processes and outcomes. Muller and Funnell (1993) state that when learners' perspectives on quality have been explored, it has often been to provide information to curriculum designers, and institutional planning. Also, funding bodies are often interested in learner feedback as part of the course review process. In these instances, quantitative approaches have generally been used. "While the information derived from such quantitative approaches can be quite sophisticated, learners are rarely in ownership of it, nor is the methodology itself integrated into the learning process" (Muller and Funnell, 1993, p.31).

An example of such quantitative approaches is Ramsden's (1991) discussion of the development of the course experience questionnaire to be used in Australian universities and colleges to determine performance indicators of teaching quality in higher education. The Okun et al.'s (1986) study on perceptions of the quality of academic life among college students used a questionnaire to obtain learner feedback. The study involved the development of a psychometric approach to investigate college students' affective reactions to their academic lives. The authors wanted to explore this issue since they felt that students' perceptions of the quality of college life are taking on increased significance and that "an important requisite for retaining students is the improvement of the quality of their experiences" (Okun et al., 1986, p.448). The authors created the "Perceived Quality of Academic Life" (PQAL) scale using six items from the instrument "Feelings About College" (FAC). Students were asked how they felt about major areas such as the classes they were taking, what they were learning, their instructors, progress towards educational goals, and what was available to them in the way of services, guidance, and assistance. Students from both community colleges and universities completed the FAC, selecting answers from a 10 point scale. The results showed that college is considered an important component of perceived quality of life and that students consider the academic component the most important facet of the

college domain. The authors concluded that the PQAL scale could be used as a subjective social indicator to monitor trends in the perceived quality of education over time, across institutions, and for different student subpopulations.

Certainly such questionnaires can provide educators with generalized information and a broader approach to evaluating learners' perceptions of quality. They do not however, give an indepth understanding of the learning experience and the nuances of quality from the learners' perspective.

Quality Learning Experience

At a recent Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) conference in Great Britain on "Evaluating the Quality of the Student Experience" (Burrows, 1992) one of the major themes that emerged was the need to place the student at the centre of the evaluation process. Student feedback was considered important for three reasons, the primary one being to help teaching staff understand the students' learning experience. Also, it was important since the information could be used to improve the effectiveness of course delivery and aid in institutional management decisions (p.2). The last two purposes are the most common reasons why institutions solicit student feedback, but it would appear that understanding the learning experience from the student's perspective is taking on increasing importance. McIlroy and Walker (1993), Muller and Funnell (1993) and Race (1993) all consider it important to view the quality of learning processes and outcomes from the learner's perspective. A limited number of studies have been identified which take this perspective. One notable study was done by Caffarella and O'Donnell (1991) on learner's perceptions on the quality of work related, self-directed learning. While the study examines quality learning outside the educational institution, the methodology used and the results have application to this research. Caffarella and O'Donnell (1991) noted that:

the review of the literature reinforced the idea that what was needed was a basic understanding of how the learner defines quality. Once the learner's perspective is gleaned, then we can begin to formulate how and in what context it can be measured, and how and in what ways it can be improved. (p.1849)

The actual purpose of the research was to provide a basic set of descriptors of quality self-directed learning. What emerged from the data though was "how" learners determine quality. This was broken down into five themes: 1) quality is judged on the basis of product and process, 2) judgements of quality evolve over time, 3) the learner primarily judges quality but secondary sources such as learner's supervisor or customer were considered important, 4) quality has different variations and levels, and 5) quality has an affective component.

While these results add to the body of knowledge concerning the learner's perspective on quality, they were not the original intent of the study. Caffarella and O'Donnell used unstructured focus group interviews to gather the data, but they suggest to achieve their initial research goal, semi-structured individual or group interviews should have been used.

Student Satisfaction

Research into students' perceptions of quality, was also done by Mazelan, Green, Brannigan and Tormey (1992) at the Student Satisfaction Research Unit, Birmingham Polytechnic. They were interested in students' perceptions of educational quality and their satisfaction with their educational experience. This was considered important because the most important "client" group in education are the students and that quality is the principal means by which higher education institutions can attempt to differentiate themselves from their educational competitors (p.76).

Through measuring student satisfaction the researchers hoped to gain a better understanding of educational quality. The results would be used to update the design of instruments used to survey student satisfaction. To obtain this information, structured participative discussion groups of students were used, in which they were asked to identify indicators of satisfaction and dissatisfaction of their education experience. Students were selected according to a cross section of faculties, from graduate and undergraduate categories and by attendance status, with a total of 265 students from 16 classes participating. The unstructured statements of satisfiers and dissatisfiers elicited from the students were analyzed and allocated to 44 core activities. These activities were then grouped into four broad areas of student concern and potential for satisfaction; teaching and learning activity area, personal/interpersonal activity area, using facilities activity area, and spending/budgeting activity area. What they found was that students rated those activities in the personal/interpersonal area, followed by teaching and learning as having the highest potential for satisfaction. Spending/budgeting activities offered the least satisfaction, followed by using facilities.

Students were also asked to rate the importance of each of the 44 core activities on two aspects, importance to enhancing the effectiveness of study and importance to enhancing the student's personal well being. The most important activity for effective study was understanding the content of lectures, and for personal well being, it was paying my way/spending/budgeting. Two activities, rated within the top five, were found to be important to both effective study and well being. These were receiving well organized and structured tuition, and receiving feedback on assessed work. Also, the two activities rated least important to both effective study and enhancing well being were joining societies and groups, and using the accommodation service. Overall, areas of spending/budgeting and teaching/learning were areas of higher importance and generally low satisfaction, and the authors felt, should be given priority. The

results also indicate the need to have well organized courses, that provide opportunities for quality interaction between staff and students. The authors conclude that user feedback on quality of educational services is critical to understanding what quality means, but work is still needed to develop appropriate methodologies and techniques to measure and use this feedback effectively (p.81). It should be noted, that this study was done at conventional post-secondary institutions and so the results may not be totally applicable to distance learning situations.

In the literature on student feedback, there appears to be some debate about the use of student satisfaction. Harvey and Green (1993) in their discussion of alternative definitions of quality in higher education, quote from Mazelan et al. (1991) that "consumer/customer satisfaction in a higher education institution is the proxy assessment of quality based on the declared levels of satisfaction of the students" (p.21). What this means is the extent to which the product or service is consistent with student expectations. Harvey and Green (1993) state that in examining student satisfaction, the product or service is still controlled by the provider, the educational institution. Investigating student satisfaction after the fact, post hoc, is generally related to quality meeting the institution's goals, as they can set the requirements and mediate students' expectations.

Harris (1992) goes on to say that universities should think about student needs rather than just satisfaction. McDowell(1992) also urges caution in using customer satisfaction. She feels that if it is overemphasized, the true focus of educational quality, the quality of the learning process, could become distorted. These concerns are certainly valid, particularly since student satisfaction measures have tended to be course specific. In the case of the study done by Mazelan et al (1992) though, they used qualitative methods to examine student satisfaction with the overall educational experience across the institution. Perhaps assessing both student needs and satisfaction is of value to institutions

concerned with educational quality.

Assessment of Quality Learning Experience

At the CNAA conference on "Evaluating the Quality of the Student Experience", another major theme which emerged was the need to have information about the quality of students' overall education experience on an institution wide basis.

Kuh (1981) outlines what he terms a holistic approach for examining the quality of the undergraduate experience in university using a four-part framework. The four areas to be assessed are context, input, involvement and outcome.

Context in this situation means institutional characteristics such as expenditures, number of students, institutional purposes and library resources. Inputs reflect the characteristics of the entering students including factors such as student ability, characteristics of the learner, and learner goals and aspirations. Involvement is concerned with interactions between and among students and faculty and could include instructional methods, informal student/faculty interactions and the effort they invest in their roles. The fourth area is outcomes, the most common quality indicator, which is concerned with the products of education such as academic achievement, alumni attainment and intellectual and social/emotional development of students.

At first glance, it would seem that Kuh's framework for examining the quality of the undergraduate experience uses a systems approach. This is where quality is conceptualized as "performance" and the underlying model of the educational process is a simple systems or "production" model of inputs, processes and outcomes. When a systems model is employed, the assessment of quality is usually based upon elements of the transformation or production process that can be readily quantified (Lindsay, 1992). But Kuh argues that since quality has multidimensional properties it is necessary to use both quantitative and

qualitative methods to assess it.

In holistic quality assessments, the methods used to gather data are dictated by students' characteristics, the institution's mission, and the purposes of the quality assessment. Usually more than one form of data gathering is required to illuminate the various aspects of the students' experience. (p.9)

It would seem that the above process does use a holistic approach, but it is an institutional based process and therefore, beyond the scope of this study which focuses only on the learners' perceptions of quality. The intent of this study is to examine all those things which could influence the learning experience, learner factors and attributes, institutional factors, and interactions between the learner and institution that affect the learning process. As there is limited research into the learner's perspective, it is a necessary first step which later can be built upon to provide a total picture of the undergraduate experience. The proposed four-part framework though, could be a useful way of looking at the learning experience, as long as it is not rigidly applied.

Quality Learning Experience in Distance Education

Most of the above discussion has dealt with quality learning and the learning experience generally within higher education. But what about distance education? Peter Cookson (1989) in his review of research on learners and learning in distance education determined that the majority of research fell into two categories: specific distance education methods and student outcomes. With regards to methods, he noted that most researchers were interested in determining the effects and/or effectiveness of one or more techniques. He found that the primary focus of this type of research was on specific outcomes rather than the learning process. "In fact, few studies actually dealt with the dynamics of students' acquisition of new knowledge, skills or sensitivity" (p.23).

Research into student outcomes could be grouped into three areas; students' reasons for drop-out, student profiles, and institutional factors. Within this group, "dropout or persistence of students enrolled in correspondence study constitute the most frequently scrutinized phenomenon" (p.31). Of importance to this study, is that some of the research findings did suggest a number of institutional interventions that could enhance distance education student's learning experience. The area that received little research attention was the nature of the adult learning process (p.31).

When looking specifically into the research done into quality in distance education, a similar conclusion to the above can be made. Much of the writing has concerned the issue of quality management in distance education. That which did deal with the learner or learning, tended to focus on the quality of a specific method (particularly learning materials), and such things as student support and course satisfaction. There does appear to be increasing interest in exploring the quality of the learning experience, and therefore the learning process, from the learner's perspective. Fenwick (1992), McIlroy and Walker (1993) and Nunan (1993a,b) in writing about quality in distance education, all indicate the importance of understanding the learner's perceptions of quality.

One study worth noting was that by Viljoen, Holt and Petzall (1991) which examined quality in an MBA program by distance education. As the outcome of the study they hoped to create a consumer (student) oriented framework of quality for the Deakin University MBA program by distance education. They viewed quality as "the outcome of a complex set of interactions between staff, students, learning materials and supportive educational methods" (p.7).

The research methodology involved a longitudinal study of 18 Deakin MBA participants. Indepth interviews were done each year, plus they observed study groups, and reviewed performance. After the second year participants were

asked "What is quality in distance education - what do we have to do to make your learning experience a quality one?" In analyzing the students' responses, the researchers developed a framework for categorizing students' perceptions of the important ingredients of quality in the MBA program, based upon students' desire for opportunities for interaction. Six different interactions were considered key dimensions of quality that would maximize student learning. These were: 1) efficient learning interaction, 2) opportunities for interaction with the learning materials, 3) opportunities for interaction with the workplace, 4) opportunities for interaction through the study group, 5) opportunities for interaction with teaching staff, and 6) opportunities for interaction through the residential school. These interactions were then used to develop a student learning framework of quality. The findings show the unique nature of education, and that education is not something produced by universities and consumed by student (p.20). "Rather it is the end result of a complex series of interactions between student and student, student and study guide, staff and student, and staff and wide array of learning materials and support activities"(p.20).

In this study, the researchers focused their definition of quality on the learning process. Specifically, the process of interactions between the learner, educational products and staff. McIlroy and Walker (1993) quote an earlier report of this study by Viljoen, Holt and Petzall (1990) where

quality is as much determined by the input of the customers as it is by the providers of the experience. Educators can never guarantee that their product will work to a pre-specified level of performance because consumers of the product must play a significant and active role in maximising their learning from the product. (p.42)

Summary

A quality learning experience is a complex concept, that is impacted by the learner, the institution and the various interactions that occur during the learning process. This means that characteristics of a quality learning experience in one situation, could be somewhat different in another situation. Yet if distance education institutions are committed to the development of learners, they need to understand quality from the learners' perspective. This begins by asking distance learners what a quality learning experience means to them and what can be done to improve it.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This research, to study how students in post-secondary distance education characterize a quality learning experience, was conducted in the qualitative research paradigm and informed by a phenomenological perspective. As noted by Muller and Funnell (1993), Barnett (1992) and Morgan (1990), qualitative research approaches are the most appropriate methods for understanding learners' perceptions of quality. Burge (1988) also argues for learner-centred approaches to research in distance education. She states that

...if the production of knowledge about distance learners, learning processes and tutoring strategies is to develop beyond experimental methods, it will do so through the greater use of methods that focus on how learners perceive and interpret their realities.
(Burge, 1988, p.7)

Caffarella and O'Donnell (1991) in their study of how learners define the quality of self-directed learning and Viljoen, Holt and Petzall (1991) who explored learners' perceptions of quality in an MBA program by distance learning, both used qualitative methodologies in their studies. While they used different data collection methods, both were concerned with quality as perceived by the learner.

Research Methodology

The following characteristics of qualitative research as outlined by Bogdan and Biklen (1992) provide the basic framework for this study:

- 1) the research is descriptive in that it is rich in detail and description,
- 2) it is concerned with process rather than simply outcomes and products,
- 3) data are analyzed inductively, and
- 4) the participants' perspective, that is, how they make sense and meaning in their lives is an essential concern.

As noted, this qualitative study will use a phenomenological perspective to help guide it. While phenomenology has a set of research strategies which can be followed, these strategies will not be used specifically in this study. Patton (1990) would call this a "paradigm of choices". He states that the primary criterion for judging methodological quality is methodological appropriateness rather than strict adherence to predetermined procedures. The issue is "whether one has made sensible methods decisions given the purpose of the inquiry, the questions being investigated, and the resources available" (p.39).

The phenomenological perspective focuses on what people experience and how they interpret the world.

One can employ a general phenomenological perspective to elucidate the importance of using methods that capture people's experiences of the world without conducting a phenomenological study that focuses on the essence of shared experience. (Patton, 1990, p.71)

People's experiences and how they interpret them are of importance to this study since the focus is on the learner's experiences.

Qualitative research methodologies were selected as the most appropriate perspective and method to approach the problem being studied. To understand how learners perceive their world and what are the nuances and subtle differences of quality requires a qualitative approach. Also, a phenomenological perspective contributes to this study because of the focus on the learners' experiences and how they interpret them.

In the next section, the research methods and techniques used in this study will be described in detail.

Research Site

Research in this study was conducted with students of Athabasca University. Athabasca University is an open university situated in Athabasca, Alberta which specializes in distance education. It is primarily an undergraduate institution which provides adult learners the opportunity to take university level courses regardless of their location or prior academic credentials. The university offers degree programs, university certificate programs and courses to students through a variety of educational institutions and associations. In 1994 the university offered 332 courses and in 1992-93 there were 12,023 registered students.

An adhoc quality committee from Athabasca University provided support for this project. Committee members represent the various academic faculties. The researcher meet and discussed the study with the committee throughout the research process and will prepare a report for them at its completion.

Participant Selection

Participants in this study were students with Athabasca University who are either currently enrolled or recently completed a credit distance education

course. Athabasca University's Distance Education Research Centre assisted in the selection of research participants. Permission was obtained from the university to involve the students in this study.

To answer the research question, purposeful study sampling was used. Its aim was to "select information rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study" (Patton, 1990, p.169). Nine students participated in the study. The following observation by Patton (1990) was helpful in determining the appropriate sample size:

validity, meaningfulness and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than the sample size. (p.185)

The criteria used to select study participants were:

- a) they come from a variety of disciplines and programs offered at Athabasca University ;
- b) they have varying levels of experience with Athabasca University, ranging from completion of one to two courses to over twelve courses;
- c) they come from both urban and rural areas of the province, primarily from Edmonton and surrounding areas;
- d) they reflect a variety of individual and personal realities in that the participants are males and females, who have different educational backgrounds and work experience, and varying reasons for enrolling in university;
- e) they are able to discuss and articulate their ideas and thoughts, and are willing to participate in the study.

The primary purpose for using these selection criteria was to ensure that a

cross section of students from the university participated in the study. The researcher wanted students from a variety of disciplines and/or programs since this could influence the learning experience and therefore its quality. The length of the students' involvement with the educational institution could also influence perceptions of quality. The study done by Viljoen, Holt, and Petzall (1991) on the quality of an MBA program in distance education used a longitudinal approach to examine students' conceptions of quality. While it was not possible to do a longitudinal study, students who had differing levels of experience with distance learning were involved.

With regards to the urban/rural selection criteria, Paul (1990) states that the issue of choice - whether a student actively chooses an open learning institution over conventional alternatives impacts student success (and possible perceptions of quality) with distance learning. Rural students often have little or no choice other than to select a distance education institution (or relocate), while urban students generally do have a choice of institution. For rural students the issue of accessibility is important to them in selecting an institution.

Learners were also selected, as best as possible given the sample size, who represented a variety of personal frames of reference and experiences. While various personal factors could influence students' perceptions of a quality learning experience, this is not the primary focus of this study. Numerous studies have been done regarding how different personal characteristics affect students' success with distance learning. In fact, a study with students of Athabasca University by Powell, Conway and Ross (1990) found the major characteristics related to success are persistence, marital status, need for success and the lack of need for support.

Research Strategies

The research approach selected was based upon the research goal and problem. It was also influenced by the amount and type of research which had been done in the problem area. In this section the topics of data collection and data analysis as carried out in this study will be outlined.

Data Collection

In describing what occurred in this study with regards to data collection, the following areas will be discussed; the data collection method used, the participant selection process and the data collection process.

Data Collection Method

In this study, individual face to face interviews was the data collection method used. Interviews allowed the researcher to follow-up on ideas and therefore obtain richer data and clarity. "The interview situation usually permits much greater depth than the other methods of collecting research data" (Borg and Gall, 1989, p.446). Also in the study done by Caffarella and O'Donnell (1991) into learner's perspectives on the quality of work related, self-directed learning, they suggested using semi-structured individual or group interviews.

Indepth interviews were done with all participants. Which means
... repeated face-to-face encounters between the researcher and informants directed toward understanding informants' perspectives on their lives, experiences, or situations as expressed in their own words. (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984, p.76)

This particular method seemed appropriate for this study as the researcher wanted to learn about events and activities that could not be directly observed (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984, p.78). The study participants were asked to describe what happened and discuss their ideas and feelings.

A semi-structured interview technique was used as it permitted the researcher to ask broad, predetermined questions to ensure similar areas are discussed by all participants. It also provided the flexibility to ask probing questions, depending upon individual responses. During the development of the interview guide, feedback was solicited from colleagues and advisors. The interview guide for the first interview focused on the participants as learners and their overall experience. The second set of questions involved the learners reflecting and expressing opinions about their experiences (Appendix A).

Two interviews were held with each participant. The first one averaged a little over sixty minutes, while the second interview was slightly shorter, at about fifty minutes. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. As part of the data collection, a research journal was also kept, in which the researcher made observations about each interview, noting thoughts and ideas. A record of conversations with participants that occurred outside the interview situation was also kept.

Participant Selection Process

After receiving approval from Athabasca University to conduct this study, the Distance Education Research Centre was contacted for assistance in selecting the study participants. Based upon the selection criteria, the Centre forwarded a list of twenty-four randomly selected, potential participants. A letter introducing the researcher and briefly explaining the study was sent to eighteen of the identified participants (Appendix B). In the following week, these students were contacted, inquiring about their interest in participating in the study and providing any additional information requested. Those interested were asked to complete a Learner Profile (Appendix C) and return it. They were asked to indicate their gender, age group, family/marital status, educational background, number of courses completed, program enrolled in and educational goal. The profile was intended to provide some basic background

information on the students.

A total of nine students returned the profiles, indicating their willingness to participate in the study. Each of these students was then contacted to set up the first set of interviews. It was explained to them that the study involved at least two interviews, each approximately an hour in length, that the interviews would be tape recorded. The issue of confidentiality was also discussed briefly.

In determining the interview location, students were asked what was most convenient for them. Five participants chose to be interviewed in their homes, three at a University of Alberta office, and one at their workplace.

Data Collection Process

Prior to beginning the actual interviews, a pilot interview with a former student of a distance learning program, was conducted. This allowed the researcher to test out the interview guide and her interviewing skills. Based upon this, the interview guide was slightly modified.

The actual interviews were held in a combination of locations but the process was similar in each case. Prior to the interviews, each participant had been spoken to twice on the phone, so some familiarity had already been established. Upon meeting for the first interview, the participant and researcher engaged in some small talk that helped establish a more comfortable atmosphere and set them both at ease. Most of the interviews occurred at a table or desk with the tape recorder being nearby. It seemed that participants were slightly more relaxed, at least initially, when the interviews were held in their own home. This is probably a result of them being in a familiar environment. Overall, this did not affect the quality of the data collected.

At the beginning of the first interview, the purpose and nature of this study,

was again reviewed with each student, as well as the interview and research process was outlined. Also the ethical issues of conducting research were outlined, and the Participant Agreement Form (Appendix D) reviewed and signed by the students. Because these issues had been actually discussed more than once, the participants had very few questions about the research process. They did express some interest in finding out what it was like to do graduate work and the type of degree the researcher was pursuing.

The focus of the first interview was to get a better understanding of the learner and to discuss their experiences with Athabasca University. The first group of questions got the learner talking about themselves, their experiences, educational background, goals, reasons for attending Athabasca University and expectations. Following this they were asked to think about and discuss the courses they have taken and their involvement with Athabasca University. How the interview developed varied, depending upon the learner involved. General areas discussed were what occurred in the courses, their involvement and interaction with staff and particularly tutors, the learning materials and assessment. This part of the interview was quite lengthy, as the learners were also prompted to reflect on how these different aspects affected their learning experience. The last group of questions in the first interview, asked the participant to think about themselves as learners, what helped them learn, how they felt about their learning, if they had been affected by their experiences and what they learned about themselves. The participants were generally more than willing to share their thoughts, ideas and feelings. Many said that they had never really taken to time to reflect upon themselves as learners and their learning experiences but they enjoyed doing it.

The first interviews lasted anywhere from sixty to eighty minutes. After the interview was completed, each participant was asked if there was anything they wanted to add or discuss further. In a few instances, the participant would

restate a point made previously, but most felt that they had already brought forwards the most important issues. They were told that if they thought of anything afterwards it could be discussed during the second interview. The participants were told that a written transcript of this interview would be sent to them for their comments and review, prior to the next interview. In the letter sent with the transcripts, they were told that this was an important part of the validation process, and that they should not be concerned with the grammar as conversations are very different from written material. The key issue is the accuracy of the transcript. See Appendix E for a sample letter.

The first interviews were transcribed verbatim, by an experienced individual hired by the researcher. The researcher then compared the written transcripts to the tape recordings, looking for accuracy, punctuation, emphasis and so forth. In preparation for the second interview, the transcripts of the first were reviewed for topics discussed, areas that needed further clarification and some preliminary analysis was begun.

The participants were contacted about two weeks after the transcripts were forwarded to them to set up the second set of interviews. Given the commitment asked of the student, they were very supportive of the research and more than willing to take the time to review the transcripts and meet for a second time. At the beginning of the next interview, which occurred in the same locations as the first, participants were asked about the first transcripts. Most had few comments to make, other than noting some minor points they wanted to make. The second interviews started out differently for each individual, as the researcher wanted to clarify and follow up on a number of areas. Following this they were asked to reflect and think back over their learning experience, as the focus of the questions were on their opinions and evaluations. This began with them describing a situation in which they felt they really learned something. They were then asked to describe a positive

experience at Athabasca University as well as a negative experience, what they liked and disliked about the university, what they value in a distance learning experience, and any changes they would make to have the "ideal" experience.

The second interviews proved to be very interesting as students felt comfortable with the researcher and the process and therefore were very open and forthcoming in their discussions. A number of points which had come out of the first interviews, emerged again in the second, strengthening the data. At the end of this interview, there was some informal conversation, and the students thanked for their involvement in the study. They all expressed interest in the results of the study. As with the first interviews, transcripts of the second were sent to participants for their validation. After each interview in this study the researcher did journal entries.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data collection and analysis often proceed simultaneously as the researcher moves back and forth between data sources and ongoing data analysis (Locke et al, 1987, 91). In this study, preliminary analysis began following each interview, with the researcher recording in her research journal observations, ideas and concepts. As the data collection process progressed, similarities and differences between the data were also noted. During the second set of interviews, ideas that had begun to appear in the first, were checked and expanded upon.

Data analysis began with having the taped interviews transcribed and then the researcher checking the transcriptions for accuracy. During this process, broad concepts and patterns across the data emerged in varying degrees and noted on the transcripts. Initial coding of the data was done using descriptive categories which came out of the topics or areas discussed in the interviews. Through this process the researcher became very familiar with the data, an

important step to be taken before entering it into the qualitative research data analysis software program "Sonar".

Before imputing the data, which are the transcripts of all the interviews plus all journal notes that have been word processed, it needs to be clean. That is the text should be as accurate and free of errors as possible, because it can not be changed once entered. The first step in using Sonar involves setting up of the folders. In this case there were four major folders, the two interviews and two sets of journal notes. Within each of these four folders are nine subfolders, one for each participant. The actual set-up process is very simple, with each subfolder, thirty-six in total being set-up so that searches can be done on all the data. Sonar searches the data for words or phrases specified by the researcher. As it searches the data for a phrase, a message will appear telling how many files, which in this case was thirty-six, are being searched. When the search is complete, it will indicate the number of times the phrase was found (occurrences) and in how many documents. It will then go to the first document in which the phrase occurred, so that all occurrences can be viewed. Sonar also provides information on how often a phrase occurred in a particular file (ie. a particular interview) and on which page it was found.

When first using Sonar, the researcher did preliminary searches based upon the descriptive codes of major topic areas discussed. Because there were differences in the words used to describe the area discussed, a synonym list was developed so a comprehensive search could be done. For example, when wanting to bring up all occurrences in which tutors were discussed, other words such as teacher, instructor, professor and so forth were included as part of this. As the researcher became more familiar with Sonar's capabilities, more refined and complete searches could be done. When reviewing the occurrences, relevant statements from the interviews and notes could be saved to a separate document. At the top of this document it was noted why the

search was done, how it was done and additional information about the occurrences.

After the initial coding process, inductive analysis process began. In reviewing the data from these searches, patterns or "recurring regularities" (Patton, 1990, p. 403) began to emerge and from these categories developed. To devise categories, once incident or unit of information is constantly compared with another in the same category (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.106). Categories were refined as the process continued and the data grouped into three major categories, presented in Chapter IV, that are concerned with the learner and their overall learning experience; learner factors, the learning experience - processes and interactions, and learners' reflections on their learning experience. Categories as stated by Guba in Patton (1990) should have internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. The first criterion means that the data in the categories hold together in meaningful ways. The second criterion concerns "the extent to which differences among categories are bold and clear" (p. 403).

In developing these three major categories concerning the learner and the learning experience, the major study themes from across the data which had begun to be identified previously became clearer and more refined. Through out this process ideas and thoughts were noted. Theme development involves interpretation of the data.

Interpretation, by definition, involves going beyond the descriptive data. Interpretation means attaching significance to what was found, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, building linkages, attaching meanings, imposing order and dealing with rival explanations, disconfirming cases, and data irregularities as part of testing the viability of an interpretations. (Patton, 1990, p. 423)

Themes are the underlying meaning or patterns in the data. The themes identified in this study were; the challenge of distance learning, learner responsibility and control of their learning, and the personalized nature of distance learning. These themes were checked against the data, the interviews and notes made by the researcher, to verify the commonalities and discussed with colleagues and advisor.

The last part of data analysis involved synthesizing the data. This meant identifying common factors which came out of the data analysis. From this the characteristics of a quality learning experience, within the context of this study, were defined. These characteristics are the essence of this study and focus on the learner and various factors which influence the quality of their learning experience.

Study Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is criterion used for assessing the rigor of qualitative research. Many concerns have been expressed about the internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity of qualitative research. To address this issue, Guba (1981) and Guba and Lincoln (1982) developed criteria to evaluate the trustworthiness of qualitative studies. They propose that the conventional terms used to evaluate scientific studies be replaced by credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Credibility

To establish confidence in the truth of the findings, the researcher is concerned with testing the credibility of the findings and interpretations of the data. In this study the following methods were used to establish credibility:

Triangulation

One method of triangulation, called triangulation of data sources, involves comparing and cross checking the consistency of information derived at different times and by different means (Patton, 1990, p.467). Within this study, multiple interviews were done with each participant, allowing the researcher to check the consistency of what they have said at different times. Data was obtained from the profiles each participant completed. Additionally, the researcher kept a research journal, of which one component was to note observations and insights of what occurred during the interview process. This observational information was compared to the interview data for consistency.

Peer Debriefing

The researcher tested her insights throughout the research process with peers. Assistance and feedback were sought from the advisory committee particularly during the data analysis and interpretation process.

Member Checks

Dependability of the data was ascertained by having participants review the transcribed interviews. Guba (1981) notes that "the process of member checks is the single most important action inquirers can take, it goes to the heart of the credibility criterion" (p.85).

Transferability

As noted by Guba (1981), "naturalists eschew generalizations on the grounds that virtually all social/behavioral phenomena are context bound" (p.86). Yet it is possible to make some degree of transferability if rich descriptions of the context and interpretations are provided so that judgements can be made by other researchers. In this study, purposeful sampling was used to select major sample variations and ensure information rich cases are selected. The intent of purposive or purposeful sampling is not to be representative or typical but to

"maximize the range of information uncovered" (Guba, 1981, p.86). Also, in the study findings the issues and context of the study are detailed and direct quotes used whenever possible.

Dependability

In qualitative studies, dependability rather than reliability is of concern. Since the research design often changes through the research process, what becomes important is thoroughly documenting these changes and having outsiders concur with the results found. To accomplish this, the researcher kept a research journal that outlines all methodological steps and decision points. Guba and Lincoln (1982) would call this a dependability audit, one way of establishing dependability.

Confirmability

Confirmability in qualitative studies focuses on the objectivity of the data rather than the researcher. "It is not the inquirer's certifiability we are interested in but the confirmability of the data" (Guba and Lincoln, 1982, p.247). Criteria for establishing confirmability in this study included triangulation and an audit trail. Also, the researcher kept a research journal that was used for a number of purposes. In one section a record of observational data from the interviews was made. Additionally, the researcher noted in the journal, personal biases and assumptions encountered during the study, and recorded methodological decisions and reasons for making them. The journaling process allowed the researcher to reflect upon and document thoughts, insights and perceptions.

Ethical Considerations

The following measures were undertaken to address the ethical concerns in this study:

1. The study was approved by the Department of Educational Policy

Studies' ethics review committee.

2. The researcher contacted Athabasca University indicating the purpose of the study, how the study will be conducted, type of commitment needed and ethical standards that will be maintained.

3. Each participant was advised by the researcher as to the purpose of the study, the degree of commitment required, the specific activities they will be involved in, how the data will be used and the ethical standards of the study. This is to ensure that the participants are clearly aware of the nature and purpose of the study.

4. Participation in the study was voluntary and prior to becoming involved, each participant was asked to sign a consent form. They were informed that they had the right to opt out of the study any time and that any identifying information in the study would be kept anonymous and confidential. If participants had any questions or concerns with the study, they could have contact the researcher or the researcher's advisor at any time. All materials generated from the research are kept secure in a locked drawer in the researcher's study. Following further analysis, the tapes will be destroyed in the next few months.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine distance learners' perceptions of a quality learning experience. As noted in the literature, there is a lack of understanding about quality in higher and distance education, particularly as it relates to the learner. While the various stakeholders in education have alternative conceptions of quality, a true commitment to quality education begins with the learner and the quality of their development. This study, through the use of qualitative research methodologies, will contribute to a better and more indepth understanding of what quality means to learners. This is an important step to improving the quality of distance education.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Introduction

The central question of this study was: "From the perspective of post-secondary distance learners, what are the characteristics of an ideal quality learning experience?" A secondary set of questions was developed to further elaborate on this:

1. In what way do individual learner characteristics and personal frames of reference influence the quality of the learning experience?
2. How do institutional factors influence the quality of the learning experience?
3. How do the interactions between the learner and the institution affect the quality of the learning experience?

To explore these questions, two interviews were conducted with each of the nine study participants. The outcome of these discussions is presented in three sections. The first section is concerned with the learners and their overall learning experience and includes three major categories which came out of the data analysis: learner factors; the learning experience, process and interactions; and learners' reflection on the learning experience. Each of these three categories contain a number of related sub-categories. Under the category of learner factors are the sub-categories learner portraits, motivations for attending Athabasca University, and expectations. Included in the category of the learning experience, process and interactions are the subcategories of interactions with staff, interactions with learning materials, and assessment and feedback. The third category of reflections on the learning experience has the sub-categories of learner maturity, preferred ways of learning and personal learnings.

The next section involves a discussion of a number of themes that emerged through the data analysis process. These are the challenge of distance learning, learner responsibility and control of their learning, and the personalized nature of distance learning.

The last section of this chapter is a distillation of the data in which the characteristics of a quality learning experience, within the context of this study, are defined.

The Learner and the Learning Experience

This first major section of the study findings includes the three major categories of learner factors, the learning experience - processes and interactions and learners' reflections of the learning experience.

Learner Factors

To develop an understanding of the participants in this study, the interviews began with them discussing their background and experiences. This is summarized in brief descriptive "portraits". Also presented in this category are data on participants' motivations for selecting Athabasca University, including their career and educational goals, and their expectations. Together this provides a basic knowledge of the learners' personal frames of reference and factors which influence their learning experience.

Portraits

Verna is a 40 year old, married, with three children, the youngest being in elementary school. She lives on a farm north of Edmonton, and is involved in the family business. Verna completed her high school diploma and afterwards

worked at a variety of jobs. She always wanted to go back to school, so when the children were basically independent she started working full time towards her degree with Athabasca University. Verna has completed twelve courses and is currently enrolled in three more. While Verna hopes the degree will lead to a new career, she is attending primarily for personal development reasons. During the interviews, which were held at her home, Verna expressed a number of times how attending university has positively affected her life.

Gerald also lives in a rural area west of Edmonton and works on the family farm. Gerald is 39 years old and just remarried during the course of this study. He had attended university a number of times but had never completed his degree. Gerald worked over the years in various aspects of property management but following an accident, had to make some career changes. As result of discussions with a vocational counsellor Gerald decided he needed to complete his degree, a Bachelor of General Studies through Athabasca University. He has taken three courses from the University and needs five more to get his degree. He seemed very enthusiastic about his experience with distance learning and enjoyed sharing his thoughts and feelings. His interviews, which were held in his home, were quite lengthy with Gerald answering the questions in considerable detail.

Elaine is 47 years old, married, and lives in a small town south of Edmonton. She had worked the last eight years as a recreational coordinator for a senior's lodge until she decided to attend Athabasca University full time. Health concerns and a desire for further education, prompted Elaine to pursue an administration certificate and hopefully following that, a degree. Elaine is a very positive person who made the researcher feel very welcome when interviewed her in her home. She had taken seven courses at the time of the interviews and will have completed the certificate this spring.

Chris is 27 years old, married with no children. She moved back to the Edmonton area about a year ago, from a small northern Alberta town. While up there Chris worked in a medical office, but looking for some stimulation, decided to take some courses from Athabasca University. She had no previous experience with taking post-secondary courses, yet found she really enjoyed learning via distance. She completed four courses in total, more out of general interest than a specific educational goal. Chris is a very soft spoken individual who right now is focusing on working rather than pursuing any further education.

Sue is 38 years old, married with two elementary school age children. Sue currently works as a nurse at an Edmonton hospital. Prior to completing her registered nursing training four years ago, she had been a registered nursing assistant for 13 years. Realizing that the type of work she was interested in required a degree, she decided to get her B.Sc. in Nursing through another university. Sue took five courses from Athabasca University as credit towards her degree. When interviewed in her home, Sue had just completed her degree and was considering graduate work. Sue is a very motivated person who has confidence in her abilities. She expressed some very strong feelings about how she felt adult learners should be treated.

Lynn is 39 years old, married with three children. Lynn is a determined individual, who because she never completed high school prior to having children, expressed a high need to further her education. She has been involved extensively with the educational system over the past number of years while working. This includes taking courses via correspondence towards her high school diploma, completing her personal care attendant as well as psych nursing certificate and, as of this year, receiving her B. Sc. in Nursing. Lynn has taken a total of nine courses from Athabasca University as credit towards her degree with another university. Lynn is an individual who tends to focus on

action, on doing things, as opposed to personal reflection.

Patti is a 37 year old single mother of two preschool children. She had taken a total of three courses from Athabasca University for which she received credit towards completing her Bachelor of Fine Arts, a degree she started years ago but had never finished. Patti wanted to complete her undergraduate degree so that she could pursue graduate work in the area of educational psychology. Athabasca University gave her the opportunity to complete her degree while staying at home with her children. Patti is a thoughtful individual who took her time when answering the questions.

Neal is 38 years old, married with no children. He has worked in the law enforcement field for over fifteen years after receiving a diploma from a community college. Neal is working towards a Bachelor's of Administration at Athabasca University, having taken five courses. To complete his degree he plans to take courses from a number of different institutions, to add variety to his learning. Neal feels that this degree will help with his career advancement and be of benefit when he chooses to retire from law enforcement. He is an assertive and confident individual, who participated actively and enthusiastically in both interviews.

Bob is 43 years old and is involved with a relationship which includes two children. Bob is committed to lifelong learning having returned to school a number of times and taken numerous personal interest courses. He did not complete his high school, but went to college as a mature student to obtain a telecommunications certificate. Nine years later he received his biotechnology certificate from a technical school. He currently works with computer software and data at a post-secondary institution. Bob has now decided that he would like to work towards a Bachelors of General Science, specializing in computers and so far has completed two courses.

The learners in this study come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. As mature learners they have a number of life roles to play which include student, parent, spouse and employee and most are balancing the responsibilities of multiple roles while attending Athabasca University. It is important to understand the learner's personal realities as it impacts their educational motivations and ultimately how they define quality.

Learner Motivations

Learners reasons for selecting Athabasca University and distance education are related to their career and educational goals, and therefore will be discussed together. These motivational factors are central to the study participants' distance learning experience.

Sue had worked for many years as a registered nursing assistant but felt that she was "missing something". She needed more challenge and responsibility. As a result, she completed her registered nursing training but decided to continue on and get her degree. "Most of the jobs that I was interested in needed a nursing degree". Sue was working fulltime, so she did not want to attend a conventional university right away since "they cater to fulltime students and I'm not fulltime, I have other priorities." Instead she chose to take as many prerequisite and elective courses as possible from institutions on a part-time basis. She wanted to do them at her "convenience". Sue found that Athabasca University offered a number of courses which fit her needs. Following this "I tried to figure out if I would be disciplined enough to study at home, and I decided yes". Distance learning provided her the flexibility she needed, while enabling her to work towards her goal.

Lynn also took a number of courses from Athabasca University as credit towards a nursing degree with another institution. After completing her psych nursing, Lynn felt she needed to develop other skills to "market myself a little

bit better". So she decided to take her registered nursing and obtain her degree. At this time she was living outside a major centre and needing a physiology course, decided to do it through Athabasca University. Prior to this she had taken high school correspondence courses and found that she liked learning via distance. "I found that I worked better that way, and I think it helped me get involved with Athabasca". Later when she moved to the city, Lynn continued taking courses from Athabasca University while also attending a conventional post-secondary institution. The flexibility this provided was important to her, as it allowed her to work at home and set her own schedule.

Gerald had taken many years of university courses but never completed his degree. He is now close to obtaining his Bachelor of General Studies with Athabasca University, having received credit for most of his previous education. It is important to Gerald to finish his degree because he has "the equivalent of seven years worth of university but no degree." While it will provide him with a sense of completion, he also feels that he needs the degree to compete in the workplace. Together with his work experience, the degree "really opens the door, it lends credibility". Once he has finished university, he hopes to do property management consulting on a part time basis, drawing upon his previous work experience. Gerald selected Athabasca University because it allowed him to "tailor the remainder of my education". He could set his own schedule, working on the farm yet still able to meet his educational goal.

Patti, like Gerald, took courses through Athabasca University for credit towards an unfinished degree with another university. She had never completed her Bachelor of Fine Arts, as she had concluded that fine arts was not her area of interest. She felt though, that "I would always go back to university". It was when she was home with her children and did some career planning that she decided to get a Master's in Educational Psychology. "I decided this is what I wanted to do. So I came back with a very specific plan". Part of this entailed

completing her undergraduate degree.

When asked why she selected Athabasca University, she said

"I think I went looking for them because I was determined to start my schooling without leaving home, without worrying about childcare and the extra finances that would have entailed".

The three psychology courses that Patti took from Athabasca University were credited towards her degree with another institution and they provided a basic introduction to her new field of study.

Neal decided that he needed further education, both for career advancement and to give him "some sense of accomplishment as well as self improvement". He was interested in the area of management and had looked at various types of programs but decided that he would pursue a degree.

"The reason I did that is because I think down the road, be it in this career or a second career after I retire, that it would be better if I had a degree opposed to a certificate behind me".

Because he works full time, Neal looked for a post secondary institution that he could take courses on a part time basis and give him credit towards a degree.

"I looked at something that was more flexible, and that is how I got steered towards Athabasca University". Neal is in the Bachelor of Administration program having completed five courses. He plans to take some of his courses from other institutions as well, because he likes to learn through a variety of methods.

Bob also selected Athabasca University because it allowed him to pursue a degree while working full time and balancing the needs of family life. He is enrolled in the Bachelor of General Sciences, specializing in the area of

computers and is able to apply what he is learning in his work. He has two reasons for wanting to obtain a degree, career advancement and personal satisfaction.

"Its always been in the back of my mind to work towards a degree of some kind, more for personal satisfaction than anything else. I do like studying for studying sake. If I won a lottery, I'd probably become a professional student. There's so many things out there to learn. I'd also like to work towards some thing were I can advance within the organization, and that requires a degree".

Elaine, like many of the other rural students, selected Athabasca University because it provided her access to post-secondary education. She felt it would be too expensive to drive back and forth or stay in the city. So in addition to access, Athabasca University was an economical alternative for her to further her education. Elaine came from a family who valued education. While she enjoyed her work as a recreational coordinator, "the need for further education kept creeping back into my life". She had also been experiencing some health problems, related to her work, and had been advised to make some changes. With the support of her family, she left her job to work full time on her Administration certificate. "I feel assured that I can reach the shorter term goal of my certificate, and I'm doing it full time". Elaine is then considering a Bachelor of Administration degree.

Verna also felt a strong need to further her education. "I'd only completed high school when I got married and its always been a goal of mine to go back and get a degree". It had bothered her that she had not continued her education, "so it's mostly just to prove to myself that I can do it, and to feel a little more fulfilled with myself". Vera is enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts, with an English major. She usually takes three courses at a time, so is basically attending full time. As for her goal, "I have always had it in my mind that my long term goal

is to get involved with some type of writing career, whether it's journalism or writing itself". Because they live in a rural area, Verna selected Athabasca University because of the distance factor. She also wanted to be able to study at home as it allowed her to be home with her youngest son and help with the family business.

Chris, when she took courses from Athabasca University, was working as a medical office assistant in a small northern town. "At the time I was kind of bored and looking for more things to do". Access to post-secondary courses was one of the factors Chris considered when selecting Athabasca University. In reviewing the university calender, she found a number of courses that interested her. "I didn't need certain pre-requisites to get into it. It just sounded perfect for someone who's working, since you can do it on your own time". Chris took courses mainly out of personal interest, unlike the other learners who had specific educational goals.

The primary motivation of most students for pursuing further education was related to vocational interests, but personal development was also seen as important. When it came to reasons for selecting Athabasca University, the flexibility and convenience offered by learning via distance, was a major factor, particularly for those students working full-time. While this is true for both urban and rural students, accessibility was also a factor for rural students.

As can be seen, learners have different motivations for attending Athabasca University, although there are some commonalities. This is also true of their expectations. Learner's expectations of the university are influenced by their previous educational experiences and familiarity with distance learning.

Expectations of Athabasca University

Students were asked what were their expectations of Athabasca University when they first became involved with the institution. These expectations affect to a certain degree the learning process, which in turn impacts the learning outcomes.

Gerald had considerable university level experience but he expected the courses at Athabasca University "to be simpler" than those offered by a conventional university. "Surprisingly enough, my perspective was that it wasn't a real university", that being able to do a university degree in your home did not "fit the norm". He said this perception changed once he began taking courses. He said he found Athabasca's courses "far more challenging and in a lot of ways had more complete coverage of the material".

Neal also found Athabasca University courses challenging, and he had to do more work than he originally anticipated. When he first began, he thought that the recommended amount of study time was "a little bit of an exaggeration". He quickly learned these statements were true and above this, it involved "quality" study time.

Lynn had taken courses from the Alberta Correspondence School previously, so she had some knowledge of distance education. She therefore expected to be able to work at her own pace and set her own schedule.

Sue also expected to be able to work at her own speed. One of her major expectations though, was that she would be able to "attain her goal". To do this she anticipated that it would take a certain amount of self discipline, but she did not realize how much it would take. "That was a learning experience". Sue felt that the opportunity to work at her own speed and accomplish her goal in a convenient way was important. As she stated " I was just starting my

degree and I needed some re-orientation time to go back to school". Her other expectation was that the courses would be transferable to another university, both the level the course was taken at and the grade received. What happened here was a major disappointment to her. Problems occurred with getting credit for a course at the level taken at, as well as only receiving credit for a course rather than the grade, thereby affecting her overall average.

When asked about his expectations, Bob's initial response was "I really wasn't sure". The first course he took more out of interest but then he realized that it was possible to undertake a degree this way. A more specific expectation was that he would have the flexibility to set his own study schedule.

Patti also commented that she did not know what to anticipate from distance education but "knew what to expect from university level classes" because of her previous educational experience. Patti thought that "I'd be pretty much on my own. That I would receive the material and work with it and not receive a lot of back up. I would really have to be self-motivated".

Chris had not really thought about what she had expected before but went on to say " I just expected it to be like going to university, taking much the same courses only being my own teacher". This idea appealed to her, as it enabled her to focus on learning with fewer distractions. Although Chris had not taken university level courses previously, she felt confident in her ability to learn via distance.

Verna, on the other hand, expressed concerns about attending Athabasca University, when she first started. She had been out of school a long time and she did not "know what was expected in a university course". She also was not sure how she would "be able to manage". Overall, she was apprehensive

about returning to school.

While Elaine was not clear what she expected, she thought that the courses would be much more difficult than she found them. As a student she could draw upon "life experiences and make interpretations of knowledge" rather than memorizing information from a book. Elaine found this a very positive way of learning.

Many of the students initially expressed that they were not sure what to expect but then went on to state some specific expectations. While there are certainly a variety of expectations, some of the learners did anticipate that they would have the flexibility to work at their own pace.

The Learning Experience: Processes and Interactions

Participants were asked to discuss their experiences with Athabasca University and the type of interactions they had. Based upon these discussions, the data were then categorized into three areas, interactions with staff, of which the tutor-learner relationship is the most significant, interactions with learning materials, and assessment and feedback.

Interactions with Staff

When talking about interactions with staff members, learners discussed in considerable detail their experiences with the tutors. Most participants had more limited interactions with other members of Athabasca University, but what transpired did to some degree affect how they viewed their learning experience.

Elaine, Sue, Patti and Gerald commented that they found the staff in the

general office very helpful and willing to answer their questions. A number of participants had to ask for an extension to their courses and they felt the office staff dealt with these requests quickly. Both Gerald and Elaine met with counsellors prior to starting with the university to discuss their program and readiness for distance education. Elaine felt these services were "exceptional".

Norman attended an introductory seminar at the beginning of his program. He said they talked about the high drop out rate and the need to be disciplined and organized. He felt that the administration should make it a "little bit more clear" to learners of the realities of learning via distance. Alternatively, Athabasca University should ensure that students obtain the support they need, particularly when starting the first course.

Patti talked about the assistance she received when transferring course credits to another university, "it was rather complicated but I thought they were extremely helpful, even though I was calling quite frequently at one point and I'm sure I must have seemed like a bother. But they were still very helpful".

Many of the students commented on the assistance they received from the library staff. Chris, Elaine, Verna and Sue felt that they responded to their requests for information and resources very promptly. Elaine said, "You phone and leave a message and within two days the library materials are at your home. From that perspective I don't think you could change that to make it any faster". Verna remarked that they were really good, "they mailed you out the materials right away". Chris when she phoned the library found them "very helpful" in providing additional information and resources when she needed them.

Overall, the staff at Athabasca University provided the support needed by the students. This was particularly important if the student had a problem and the

staff listened to the concern and dealt with it promptly. This was especially meaningful to Sue, "I found that the staff at Athabasca University, whenever you had any question or when you needed material or anything like that, they were very respectful, very helpful. I got the feeling that I was being treated as an adult".

Learner-tutor relationships

The tutor-learner relationship was seen by the learners as a central factor influencing their learning experience. The learners had taken between two and twelve courses, so they had many opportunities to interact with different tutors.

Bob had taken two courses in computing science, an area in which he works. He felt that the support provided by the tutors was not essential to his learning as he had the knowledge and resources available to deal with most problems that arose. But he did state for individuals not working in the field or this was their first exposure to this type of material, that the interaction with the tutor would be important. "They need to have somebody they can relate to on specific material or problems areas".

Bob's relationship with the tutors in his courses was therefore minimal. Most interactions involved receiving feedback on assignments and taking telephone quizzes. He did not have many questions for the tutors but in the one instance when he had a problem, the tutor answered his concerns "directly" and "satisfactorily". While he may not have used the support, he knew "it was there if needed".

Bob noted that at times it was difficult to get through to his tutors, and when they were available did not always fit with his schedule. He suggested that e-mail could be used to communicate with tutors, particularly in dealing with common issues confronted by students. Tutors could then answer learners'

concerns much quicker.

In talking with Chris about her interactions with tutors, she said that they were there when she needed them and she had minimal difficulty getting hold of them. She noted a couple of exceptions when trying to contact tutors to take an exam. She would have to call for over an hour before she got through. This she found "inconvenient". When asked what she valued in a learning experience, Chris said "having a good tutor who is available more than just one or two days a week". This was particularly important if she was having problems.

Chris preferred the tutor to make the first contact. "I liked it when they called first to introduce themselves. It made you feel more comfortable". For Chris, the tutor making the initial contact had a positive influence on the relationship.

While overall, Chris found she had a good relationship with her tutors, she described one negative instance. She had received a note from the tutor at the beginning of the course urging her to contact him, which she did not do until the first tutor quiz. When taking the quiz she felt he was not giving her enough time. "I felt like I was being rushed and that he had other things to do". The tutor for this course was changed shortly afterward, and Chris found the next one "much better".

Neal, in contrast to Chris, preferred to contact the tutor first, right after receiving the course materials. He wanted to introduce himself, and find out what they thought about the course, its materials and the assignments. As he put it "I just get a little dialogue going, a little rapport". After this initial discussion he would then get into the course.

Neal describes the relationships he had with his tutors, in the five courses, as

positive. He found them to be very knowledgeable and professional people. From his description, they tended to have a fairly business-like relationship, where the focus was primarily on the course. Yet he did not get a "cold sense" from them and never had any concerns. He felt that the interactions with the tutors were important to him as a learner.

One frustration which Neal expressed a number of times was the ability to contact the tutor only once or twice a week. This was particularly a problem when he was having difficulty understanding something but had to wait a couple of days to talk to his tutor. While he realized it is not possible to have twenty four hour access to a tutor, "it's just so frustrating that you have to wait".

Sue mentioned numerous times during the two interviews how she felt that Athabasca University understands the needs of adult learners and treated her with respect. She contrasts this with her experience at another university, which she found unsupportive and depersonalized. To illustrate this she described the support received from the tutors of two courses she had difficulties with, statistics and political science. In the statistics course the tutor made herself available outside the scheduled hours. She told Sue this was something she did not normally do. As for the political science course, Sue was permitted to take one at a higher level than she had pre-requisites for so she could receive the credits she needed with another institution. The tutor being aware of the situation, provided additional support. The dean also phoned her a number of times to see how she was doing. She found this experience "exceptional".

With regards to contacting tutors, Sue noted that they generally called her first. "They were usually quite prompt in phoning and welcoming me, telling me about themselves, their availability, and asking if I had any questions about the material". Sue said for the majority of the courses, she did not need much

help. "I didn't phone them a lot, but when I needed them they were there, they were committed". She felt that the tutor support was of value to her, just knowing that they were available when she needed them.

Patti also spoke positively of her interactions with tutors. In the three courses that she took, the tutors contacted her first to introduce themselves, when they were available and generally establish some sense of rapport. She found that for the first two courses, the tutors provided the help and support she needed to get back into studying. This was important to Patti as she had been out of school for some time. She said she did not have many questions about the course materials though, as it was "quite straightforward".

Patti had a number of discussions with her tutor at the beginning of her third course. She initially found the material confusing but the tutor was "very willing to start right from scratch and lay it out in a very basic way, so I could understand it". This was helpful, particularly as he took the time to answer her questions, no matter if they "seemed silly or anything". After this Patti did not feel the need to contact her tutor regularly.

Patti preferred to work through the learning material at her own rate. If she did have any questions she would contact her tutor. Like Robert and Sue, she was "happy to know they were there in case I needed them". But in talking about interactions with tutors, Patti did mention that she had a number of conversations with them about ideas she found particularly interesting, or wanted to discuss in more depth. She enjoyed these discussions and she found the tutors more than willing to engage in them.

In contrast to Sue and Patti, Lynn's comments about tutor support were quite mixed. When talking about interactions with tutors, the amount seemed to depend upon whether she needed some help or if the tutor called to see how

she was doing. Lynn tended to call her tutors only when necessary. She said that for a couple of courses, the tutor contacted her at the beginning, which she quite liked. In describing one incident, Lynn notes that

"she ended up phoning me right away to introduce herself and that was quite nice. I felt quite good about that. It was nice to know that she actually did care about who I was, rather than just a name".

Lynn also tells about a situation in which one of her tutors phoned to see how she was doing in a course, and ended up helping her with a different course. "She spent over forty-five minutes on the phone talking about philosophy. I learned so much from that, and she wasn't even a philosophy teacher". Yet when asked about the importance of interactions with tutors to her educational experience, she said "overall, I could have done without them. There were only two or three who were really beneficial to me". In discussing this further she said that the difference could be the tone of voice the tutor used. Some gave her the sense that they considered her a valuable person.

Lynn's most significant learnings involved interactions with tutors. It was something which couldn't be learned from a text but came as a result of dialogue and discussion. Alternatively, her most negative experience with Athabasca University was when she received some very negative feedback from a tutor on an assignment. She never talked to her tutor about the assignment and from then on only contacted her when necessary. While Lynn had not been willing to follow up with the tutor, she did say it could have made a difference if the tutor had called her and said "let's talk about this". As a result, a course that she started out thinking was "extremely interesting and challenging", she ended up disliking.

Reflecting later on her experience, Lynn acknowledged that "maybe tutors do

make a difference" , both positively and negatively. When talking about what she liked about learning via distance, Lynn said that you can "keep in touch with your tutors regularly". So they "know you by name" rather than just a face in a large university classroom.

Verna felt that the tutor support system worked very well. It gave her the feeling that "you're not on your own all the time" and if she had a problem, she could call them. When talking about the types of relationships she had with her tutors, she noted that each one was a little different, some were more open and friendly than others. Most were very understanding and helpful but she did note on occasion " I kind of felt that maybe I was bothering the person". But she then said "that's their job, that's what they are there for". Verna would like the opportunity to meet her tutors, suggesting a "meet the tutor night". "It would help sometimes if you could see the person you've been talking to". This would personalize the educational experience, making the student feel more connected with the university.

As to the importance of tutor support, Verna felt that it would be hard to get much out of the courses without the interaction between tutors and students. Verna contrasts her experience with Athabasca University with that of her two sons attending another university, noting that it has given her "more confidence in the Athabasca system". Her sons get little personal feedback from their professors due to the class sizes. "I'm thinking, I can stay at home and talk with my tutor more than they would in a class like that".

Verna, like a number of the other participants, would like to see the tutors available more than one or two nights a week. She was concerned that with recent cut backs in education, that access to tutors would become even more of a problem.

When asked about what she thought of the tutor support, Elaine commented that its "generally been really good, so far" She then goes on to say something similar to Verna, about how much better learning this way is versus regular university classes where there are hundreds of students. "I really count myself privileged that I can phone my tutor and talk one on one, even if it is via telephone".

Elaine found that who made the first contact varied from tutor to tutor. Her relationships with her tutors seemed to be of two types: a more personal relationship, in that a rapport was established between the two of them, contrasted with one which was more business like, with the focus being on the course. She described in detail some of the different types of interactions she had with her tutors rather than talking about tutor relationships generally.

Elaine started her first course in the summer. The tutor she had, discussed things with her and provided helpful feedback on assignments. He then went on holidays, so she was assigned a second tutor, with whom Elaine had only one conversation, before she too went on holidays. The third tutor was what Elaine called "a really by the book-type person" in that she wanted answers to assignments that came straight from the text. Elaine felt that there was a communication problem, as this tutor had difficulty explaining things to her. In the end Elaine said she did well in the course, but that this was probably more due to her interest in the subject than the interaction with the tutors. The constant changing of tutors negatively affected her learning experience.

Elaine then recounted a particularly positive experience with the tutor for one of her administration courses. The tutor phoned regularly, was easy to communicate with and provided helpful feedback on assignments. Elaine said she "felt privileged to have her as a tutor".

Elaine tells of a situation with a tutor she had for a statistics course. She had received negative feedback on her first assignment, in that it was all scribbled over, just a "sight to behold". Elaine felt that she had done her best given the examples provided in the textbook. When she contacted the tutor, he was very difficult to understand and Elaine was made to feel like "a complete idiot". Rather than allowing the situation to continue, Elaine told him she did not understand what he was telling her. He then took the time to explain things and provide examples. After that communication improved and the remainder of the course went well.

Elaine also received negative and unconstructive feedback from a tutor on an assignment, in a more recent course. She was very upset about this so she contacted the university, who agreed to change the tutor. She felt very positive about their quick response to her concern. Her relationship with the second tutor was much better, more because of the type of feedback given than the marks she received. Even though the situation started out negatively, Elaine found it to be a positive experience in the end because the university was willing to listen to her needs as learner.

In both the accounting and communications courses Elaine is currently enrolled in, there is a tutor hot-line where she can contact a tutor five nights a week. While she has made limited use of this service, she liked knowing that help was available if she needed it rather than having to wait. She considers this type of service very "valuable". Like many of the other learners, Elaine had concerns about the availability of tutors.

Overall, Elaine feels that "tutor support is really valuable because they are your check point in doing the assignments, or if you are comprehending and learning".

Gerald said that at the beginning of the courses, he did not usually contact his tutors because he did not feel the need at that point. After a few weeks into the course, the tutor usually contacted him to introduce themselves, and see how he was doing. At this point, they would talk about the course, expectations, assignments, and any questions he had. He found these first conversations helpful, "reaffirming he was on the right track".

Gerald felt that as a learner in distance education, he was primarily responsible for his own learning. This was because the tutor was only available once a week. He considered this a drawback, particularly if he was encountering a problem and could not talk to his tutor right away. He gave one example in a course where he could not reach his tutor for three weeks. As a result, he felt it was "almost a down time for me". It disrupted the "learning flow" and he found it hard to "get back on track". While lack of availability of tutors was a concern, he also noted that it forced you to "work harder and try to understand the material and draw on other sources".

The tutors were very important to Gerald's learning experience. You could establish a "one on one dialogue" with your tutor, something not possible in a regular university course with the large class sizes. Gerald mentions a number of times how this rapport with his tutors "personalizes the educational process", that he was more than a number.

In discussing interactions with tutors, Gerald said that they would try to relate the material to what he knew or experienced, as well as their own experiences. He found the feedback they provided on assignments constructive and helped with his learning.

The interactions students had with their tutors had a major effect upon their learning experience. A number of the participants felt that they had more

interactions with their tutor, either via the telephone or written feedback, than could be found at a traditional university. How learner and tutor communicated influenced the type of relationship that they developed. In most cases, it was the learner who controlled the amount of contact there was between them, although the tutor did have some influence. Most participants indicated that they would have liked to be able to contact their tutors more frequently than is currently available.

Interactions with Learning Materials

In most of the courses taken by the participants in this study, the learning materials were the primary method by which students learn. So how students interacted with the materials and felt about them is important to their learning experience.

Verna found that having completed quite a number of courses, she had become quite comfortable with this method of learning. When she first started though, "I would just sit and look at the pile of books for a while and wonder how I was going to get started". It was difficult initially, to get herself organized and she found herself behind in her first few courses.

"I'd read about budgeting your time, but reading about it and doing it are two different things. I did not have a good grasp of how much reading was actually involved and how much time you have to devote".

Now she looks forward to receiving the course materials, looking through them immediately and drawing up a course schedule for herself. Verna noted a difference between courses, where the study guides for introductory levels had detailed guidelines and those at the more senior level had less. She found that for one English course a study guide was not provided. "You're just on your own. I think that after you have taken a certain number of courses, they think

you are able to handle it". Verna also found the course structure did vary depending upon the subject area. In particular she notes a rather negative experience with a biology course. Part of the problem was that she found the subject area difficult, but it was also the lab work required. She had to go to Athabasca four or five times to do them. Being away from home all day was inconvenient plus she had "trouble following some of the labs" and got a "little discouraged". The format of the course has now changed, so the lab portion is now optional.

Overall, Verna found the learning materials well put together, the textbooks more than adequate and the supplementary resources of audio and video tapes, very helpful. Verna has been really pleased with the "quality of the courses". When she first started with Athabasca University, she was not very knowledgeable and had some concerns about the credibility of the their degree. "But I have gained confidence as I've worked through the courses, seen the course materials, and talked with other people who have gone through it".

At the beginning of each course Patti would preview the text and study guide. She considered the study guides a vital part of the courses. They helped her organize her course work schedule plus they provided review questions.

"I don't know how other people use the study guides but to me they were absolutely essential. They were the way that I organized all the material in my mind, and the way that I organized a schedule on how I was going to work".

Patti felt that if she had read all the material and answered the study guide questions, she was prepared for the tests.

In these courses, the ability to learn via reading materials is central to the student's success. Patti noted that, "I don't know that if you are not fond of

reading how manageable the courses would be for you". While the tutor can certainly help, learning via distance is quite different from attending a lecture and taking notes. As a result, Patti thinks that having a good, well written textbook and study guide are important for this method of distance learning.

Lynn would not examine the course materials until a couple of days after she receives them. "I sort of prepare myself mentally". When she did open it, she tried to get herself organized and slowly into the course. Lynn says she did not like to "read the fine print", by which she means the study guides. She did not use them extensively for some of her first courses, but as she went along, Lynn realized that they were helpful. Lynn liked to find "short cuts" in doing her courses but she also learned that this was not always the best approach.

She felt that the courses from Athabasca required her to do more reading and work as compared to courses from other institutions. This meant she had to learn to manage her time effectively. "I think it would be impossible to do Athabasca courses if you are not well organized" and have good time management skills. Generally, she thought the learning materials were good, they "satisfied" her and she was "able to get a lot of knowledge" from them. While Lynn was generally pleased with the courses she took from Athabasca, she got the impression from faculty of the other university she attended that they "did not think as highly of Athabasca courses". She thought this could be related to the exam structure and the level at which marks are transferable.

Sue also made a comment about obtaining the course materials. When she received them for the first course, Sue said she felt somewhat overwhelmed, because of the amount of information there was and not being familiar with distance learning. After she had an opportunity to review them she felt much better. Sue found the student manual the same for each course, so she never used it after the first one. "But the work books were nicely set up, they

corresponded very well with the textbooks". She liked that they included a weekly schedule which helped her get organized. The list of resource materials was also helpful. "I found the packages were very well done up, they were well prepared. I was quite impressed, you just open the box and you are ready to start, once you sort everything out".

Neal, like many of the other participants, would go through the materials very thoroughly when he first received them and try to get himself organized. He found the study guides and the format of the assignment and exams helpful with this.

"I'm pleased with the way they have laid it out because it does make it easier for the student. It could have been much harder if someone hadn't taken the time to develop these programs and use a structured learning format".

He saw this as particularly important because of how central the learning materials are to distance learning. While he does not say that the courses are overly difficult, the amount of material does make it "challenging and it requires considerable self-discipline to work through it". Neal commented a number of times during the interviews, that to learn via distance a person must be well organized and very self motivated.

Gerald thought the learning materials were generally well laid out and organized for the courses he took. You could complete the courses and have a basic understanding of the material if the student followed the course structure. Gerald thinks that there is also the ability to "expand" the learning beyond this through discussions with the tutors and by application to his own experiences. He finds it a "very different way of learning because it can be geared to the individual".

One area that Gerald did comment on at some length was the relevance or how current some of the course material was. He said that some of the courses were not as up to date as they could be. He noted this in the human resource management, economics, and in particular the computer programming courses. Gerald acknowledges that "one of the problems with any educational system is that it is slightly behind". The lack of up to date content has a greater impact on distance learning because the learning materials are the primary method by which students learn while conventional institutions have the ability to discuss current concepts in the classroom. Gerald suggested that the university expand the use of technologies in how they deliver courses and to enable easier access to resources.

Bob, like Gerald, expressed concern about how current the course materials are. "The only difficulty or problem I have had with the material is the fact that some of it is out of date". While he is able to access more up to date information and resources through his work, it still caused problems. He feels that individuals who do not have the same opportunities as him would be at a disadvantage. It makes it much more difficult for them and certainly is "not current with what is happening in the field". Beyond this, Bob thinks that given the nature of the courses, Athabasca University should be using the technology they are teaching about to support and deliver their programs.

One situation Bob mentioned was his inability to enrol in a particular computer course he really wanted to take. He registered twice, but due to high demand, "materials were not coming in fast enough to keep up". As a result, he has had to take less desired alternative courses. He feels that the university should be able to respond to student needs quicker, especially if it seems to be an recurring issue.

When talking generally about the learning materials, Bob felt that the study

guides were well laid out, and easy to read and follow. The textbooks are the "same as textbooks anywhere". Bob values being able to apply the theory he learns to realistic situations. He feels this should be build into the course materials and that individuals who have practical experience in the area should be involved in the course development. With courses from Athabasca University, if you want to progress beyond the "basics" or look at things from an alternative perspective, you need to go beyond the material. He was able to do this through his work. Other students he felt could probably get this through discussions with their tutors.

Elaine noted that the learning materials were similar between courses, having textbooks and study guides but that the types of assignments varied. They were developed specifically for the particular area of study and frequently required the student to apply the concepts learned. Rather than talking about the learning materials generally, Elaine tended to discuss specific situations. Elaine mentioned instances with two courses where she had some concerns with the learning materials. The first involved a statistics course where the assignments in the study guide required the student to apply concepts to real life situations which were quite different than the exercises in the text. She felt "they could have done a better job in the study guide in their explanations".

The second situation was with an accounting course, where Elaine had concerns about the text used. She found its format and structure difficult to follow and understand. The text is used for several courses "so you are not sure the information you are reading is really relevant to what you are supposed to be learning". Elaine, like Patti feels a well formatted and written textbook is important to distance learning.

Chris did not say much about the learning materials other than the study guides laid out clearly what she needed to do, and she was able to follow them easily.

She did comment that in her last psychology course, there seemed to be some confusion in the way it was structured. She had to read the directions in the study guides "quite a few times in order to know what was expected of me and how I should approach it". This course also used more than one text, so it required her to go "back and forth". Because Chris was very interested in the courses she was taking, she found that overall the learning materials met her needs.

Students overall felt that the learning materials met their needs. They found them generally well written and laid out. The study guide was important their learning as it helped them organize themselves, given the amount of material they needed to cover. A number of the learners indicated that being able to relate the materials to their own experiences and to apply the ideas and concepts learned was something which should be build into the courses. This issue is also important in learner assessment and feedback.

Learner Assessment and Feedback

The issue of assessment and feedback has significance to learners because of the limited personal interaction in distance education, and is interrelated with tutor support and learning materials.

Neal mentioned the issue of assessment more frequently than the other participants. He found the courses and specifically the exam in distance education "more difficult than being in a class environment". Because of this, he gets a real sense of satisfaction when he writes final exams. In discussing the assignments, Neal said the type depended upon the course he was taking. They focused upon the application of the concepts. "It wasn't just a matter of memorizing the material" but you had to "grapple", to try and understand and "push it a little bit further". He felt that this made the courses more challenging but it was also "good teaching". Neal found the feedback he received on

assignments beneficial to his learning and he appreciated how quickly tutors provided it.

When asked about changes to improve the learning experience, Neal made recommendations about helping students prepare for the final exam. He would like more guidance and information provided on the final exam, so that he could feel better prepared, for what he considers "very difficult exams". He suggested there be a review of the key concepts for each course and information given on the structure of the exams. He had received this when taking courses from other institutions, but not with Athabasca University. "I don't know if its a policy of theirs, a rule or just the culture of the university".

For Elaine, the type of feedback she received on assignments influenced her learning. While it did not always have to be positive, Elaine felt feedback should be constructive. On a couple of occasions she received, what she considered negative and unconstructive feedback, and this seriously affected how she approached the course. She found this particularly difficult to deal with if the examples provided in the learning materials were of a different type than those on the assignment or exams. The importance of the way feedback is given is illustrated in a recent experience. Elaine had been disappointed in the mark she received on an assignment, but through analyzing the feedback and talking with her tutor she realized that she had missed the main concepts. Her tutor was "really good at explaining afterwards, so then we also reviewed the concepts of the assignment I am working on now", helping her to "understand and apply them". Elaine feels that she receives more feedback on her assignments in distance education as opposed to what "would happen in a classroom situation". She finds the tutors are prompt in providing helpful feedback and returning assignments.

Gerald noted that the comments and feedback provided on assignments and

exams contributed to his learning.

"It wasn't just a case of you making an error and that's the end of it. It was here is how it could be improved, here's where to shift your thinking, and how to extend this thought. The comments were a learning experience as well as a commentary on the way it was marked".

He felt that the individualized feedback from the tutors, personalized the experience. As for the assignments and exams, they were a combination of theory and practice. The assignments in which he had to apply the concepts, such as in writing a computer program for a particular application, he found positive. In the case of quizzes which involved multiple choice, he questioned how effective they were as a learning tool and wondered how easy it was to cheat.

Sue comments that at Athabasca University, the tutors focus on the content and quality of the assignment in giving their feedback. "I found the feedback helpful because it clarified any areas of misconceptions" and ideas which needed further development. "I wasn't frustrated when I got my papers back from Athabasca because I knew they marked on content rather than the other university" whom she thought concentrated more on style, grammar and punctuation.

While the structure of the assignments and feedback Sue considered well done, she had problems with the "pressure" to get sixty percent on the final exam to pass to course. In one course Sue had a seventy-eight percent average prior to the final but only received fifty-nine percent on the final exam. Sue appealed the mark but lost, and when she chose not to rewrite the final, she failed the course. This made her very angry, particularly as she had to spend the money and time to redo it through another institution. When she spoke to Athabasca University about this issue, she was told that it was done this way to establish

the university's credibility and ensure students are doing their own work. While Sue said this was understandable, it still puts considerable pressure on the student.

Lynn said that because she had limited interaction with her tutors, most of the feedback she received was through her assignments. Overall, she learned a lot from the courses at Athabasca University. This learning method may not work for all subject areas even though the university attempts to build in appropriate learning and assessment strategies. Lynn cites as an example a nursing course dealing with physical assessment which she took. Lynn, like Elaine, had a strong reaction to receiving negative feedback on an assignment. She did not understand why she was told to redo the assignment nor did she attempt to discuss it with her tutor. Her response was to put the course away for about two months. During that time her tutor did not contact her.

Bob said that the type of feedback he received on assignments included notes on ideas, comments, further information and so forth. "If you were having a problem or there was something you didn't understand, then you could go back to the tutor and get further input". He found this particularly helpful when he first started the program as it gave him a sense of how to approach assignments. Verna also expressed that the feedback was beneficial "at the beginning because I really did not know what was expected in a university course".

All of the participants commented that the assignments and feedback involved a combination of demonstrating knowledge in an area, and the ability to understand and apply concepts and ideas. How it was structured depended upon the subject area and course level. Students uniformly felt that the feedback they received was an integral part of their learning experience and certainly influenced their perceptions of a quality experience.

In the previous two major categories, learner factors and the various processes and interactions of the learning experience were discussed. The third major category concerned with the learner and the learning experience is learners' reflections on this experience.

Reflections on the Learning Experience

This section focuses on the issue of being a learner in distance education. It is concerned with what new knowledge and insights learners have gained about themselves and their learning styles. The sub-categories under this area are learner maturity, preferred ways of learning and personal learnings.

Learner Maturity

In discussing themselves as learners in distance education, many of the participants felt that it helped being older and more experienced. Gerald stated that when it came to distance education

"I don't think I would recommend this route for somebody as their first university experience because it is tough. I think that a lot of people would just end up dropping out because they could not handle the size of the workload that there is".

It is not just the discipline or "study skills" needed to complete the course work that would make it difficult, Gerald also feels that younger students would not have the experiences to relate to. He draws upon his former experiences to help him through the courses and make it "relevant" to him.

Elaine also comments that her experiences in the workplace have given her the "determination" and discipline needed to learn via distance. She questions

whether "somebody who is younger or right out of high school" could do well in distance education unless they are a "real determined type". Beyond this, Elaine notes the advantages of what she calls "adult education", in that "you've got so many life experiences you can relate to and apply the information to".

Neal thinks that younger students probably need the "classroom environment" to make learning positive for them. As a mature student, he has other commitments, so has different goals and priorities than younger students. For him the flexibility that distance education provides is important since it allows him to meet his needs. Verna thinks that being older helps. "It gives you a little more ability to work independently and to be responsible for what you are doing". Patti has found through her various experiences she knows what she wants, and as a mature student is committed to obtaining her goal.

Learners were never asked directly about issue of maturity, it was something brought up by them in the process of discussing their experiences. As mature learner with considerable life and work experience, they felt that they were better able to deal with the demands of distance learning.

Preferred Ways of Learning

Learners reflecting upon their learning experience and learning styles discussed ways they like to learn and what influences their learning. Patti said that she was "quite happy to work at my own speed". That was the way she liked to learn. This way of studying fit into her lifestyle, enabling her to balance family and student roles. Because of the type of courses she was taking, which involved a considerable amount of factual information, she did not feel that anyone could really help her. What she needed to do was go "through the material as many times as necessary for me to remember and understand it all". This does not mean that Patti did not want any interactions with other individuals, meaning tutors or other students. In fact she remarked that she

would have liked the chance to talk with other students, to help keep her motivated and so she "did not feel so much like you were on your own out there". Patti wondered though if this would "defeat the whole idea of distance learning".

When asked what helped her learn she said the most important thing was being organized. She found that the study guides helped her with setting up a schedule and learning how to pace herself. When it came to keeping herself motivated, Patti felt that having a definite goal was very important. "I knew where I was going" and "if I did not finish this step, I wasn't going to get any closer to that goal". She discovered through the educational process that she did have the determination to attain her goal.

Chris preferred to work at her own rate, selecting the times she would study. She felt she could focus much better this way. Learning via distance suited her learning style because she would have been "distracted by the classroom atmosphere" and "found it easier to do it on my own time". Chris said having a schedule and setting "deadlines" kept her motivated. While Chris enjoys learning this way, when asked what would have made her experience better, she, like Patti, mentioned having contact with other students. It would be positive to talk to individuals in comparable situations and who share like interests.

Elaine, similar to Patti and Chris, liked to learn at her own pace, something she really values. She also felt that to be successful in distance education requires a considerable amount of "determination". Having "goals in mind" is an important part of keeping her motivated. While Elaine looked forward to the challenge of returning to school, she was more comfortable doing it via distance rather than attending classes. "When I think of a classroom with over a hundred people in it, that thought to me is almost scary". She probably could

have adapted, but it did seem "overwhelming". As a result, she is "quite happy" to do it "one on one" at this point. This is referring to individualized contact with her tutors. She felt there were certain advantages to being a mature student though, with the ability to relate previous experiences to what she was learning. When describing an incident in which she "really learned something", Elaine talks about a very practical assignment she had in a communications course.

Sue is an independent learner who also wanted to work at her own speed. She did not miss the interaction of the classroom and other students. "It isn't really important to me because I have other commitments". She says her focus is on learning versus social interaction, as she has a specific goal she is working towards. She would rather "learn by herself". "The way I like to learn is to read it really well the first time and I can not do that if I'm talking to other people", but if she encountered problems she would call her tutors. Sue learned how important it was to her that educational institutions treat learners as adults. She felt that Athabasca University provided the support that meet the needs of independent learners like herself. As a result, her experience was much more positive and stimulating than she found at another institution.

Gerald expressed a similar opinion, in that the way the university structured their programs suited his learning style. "It's the way the material is set up, it's the support from the tutors, my background and the ability to go back and relearn something". He felt he learned more effectively this way. "I found that I have learned more and retained much more through this method of study than sitting in a classroom". Part of this comes from the learner being more responsible for their own learning because no one is "lining up the concepts for you, you have to do it yourself". The tutors, of course are there to help and are a key aspect of the learning experience. Gerald said that he did not use some of the resources available to him at Athabasca University because he had

ready access to reference materials and family members who could help him if needed. Another important part of learning for Gerald, was that he could apply the theory and concepts he was learning to his own experiences. Application to real life situations made the learning more relevant to him.

Like many of the participants, Gerald also wanted to learn at his own pace. The flexibility offered was an important aspect of learning via distance. While the flexibility allowed him to study while balancing work and family responsibilities, it also meant being very self-disciplined. Gerald acknowledged that he had a tendency to "procrastinate" at times, taking longer to complete a course than he should have.

Neal also valued the flexibility as he wanted to be "able to study and learn on my own time". He felt that Athabasca supported this by the way they structured the courses, the study guides, format of the assignments and so forth. This makes it easier for the student to learn, because distance learning requires "self discipline and organizational skills", which in turn requires having specific goals to work towards. Neal, similar to Elaine and Gerald, found it constructive when he could see the direct application of what he was learning to realistic situations, which in his case was his work environment.

While Neal likes taking courses from Athabasca University, he also requires variety in teaching methods.

"I really enjoy Athabasca, but I like to have a little variety. I think I would find it a bit monotonous or boring to take all ninety credits from this style of learning. I like to see a little bit of variety, that works best for me".

To fulfil this need, Neal plans to take courses from other institutions who offer different methods of teaching in the "classroom environment". He did suggest

that Athabasca University add more variety to the way they deliver their courses.

For Lynn, having the power to organize her own time, to do things when she wants to is important to her as a distance learner. This ability to control her learning is valued by Lynn as she is very focused on obtaining her goal in the quickest and most efficient manner. This is reflected in statements she made about finding "short cuts" to most of the courses she has taken. Unlike Neal, she does not miss the interaction of the classroom, although Lynn does state that in some of the nursing courses "you need to be in a classroom setting so you can have the instructor tell you what's important". When asked what helped her learn, Lynn mentioned the review questions at the end of each unit.

Bob preferred to work through the courses at his own pace, having the flexibility to plan his own schedule. He learned the hard way the amount of work and commitment needed to be successful in distance education. Bob took two courses when he first started with the university, but only completed one. He felt he "over extended himself" by attempting to take on two courses without having a good study plan in place. He learned from this the need to be well organized, disciplined and more importantly, not to over commit himself.

The courses Bob took were in an area in which he worked, so he felt that is was just a matter of working through the material. "What helps me learn the best is taking the information, getting away from distractions and just sitting down until I work through the problems". An important aspect of this is to then "apply it in a different situation". Bob likes to learn new ideas but also to extend it to new possibilities, a view shared by many of the learners. When asked to describe a positive learning experience with Athabasca University, Bob found he could not answer this question. He felt it was "removed from the personal experience level" because of the lack of interaction with other people

on a regular basis. He said the most positive aspect of the learning experience at the experiential level, was 'getting the final marks back after the exam'. Bob has had limited exposure to distance learning, having complete just two courses, so he still thinks of the educational experience with in the more conventional classroom sense.

When Verna first started with Athabasca University, she was concerned about her ability to learn this way. Once she had completed a couple of courses, and learned about setting a schedule, she gained confidence in herself. Like most of the other learners, she wanted to work at her "own pace" and in her own home environment. "I think that if I was tied down to going to classes every day, I wouldn't have been able to fit it in. I would have put it off". Verna found she learned best by doing the assigned exercises, writing the essays and receiving feedback. This forced her to think and do the "work on her own". Verna said she was "really pleased" the way the programs at Athabasca University were structured and the support provided. "This way of learning really worked for me". In fact, Verna said that even if she had easy access to a conventional institution, she would choose to attend Athabasca University.

While Verna now sees herself as an independent learner, a particularly positive experience she had at Athabasca University involved interactions with other students. She had attended a seminar for an English course where she had an opportunity to meet other mature students also returning to school. Through their discussions, Verna found that it "gave me the enthusiasm to keep going and to have confidence that I would be able to do it". She wondered if the university could facilitate such opportunities more frequently.

For many of the participants the flexibility offered by distance education to learn at their own pace and set their own schedule was important to them as adult learners. The structure and support provided by the university enabled them to

be independent learners. For others, the ability to relate and apply what they have learned is a key part of learning for them. Interestingly, because of this being distance education, a few of the students mentioned how having contact with other students did or could have a positive affect on the experience.

Personal Learnings

This category looks at learners' personal reflections on their learning experience, how it has affected them, their feelings and what they have learned about themselves.

When Sue finished her first course with Athabasca University she felt enthusiastic about doing the next one. Each course offered her an opportunity to learn something new or built upon previous knowledge. She said that through the process she learned how to manage her time better, yet be flexible enough to deal with problems as they arose. While Sue's friends and family were generally supportive of her educational efforts, she did comment that "I'm really the only person who knows how much effort it has taken me to get this far" and she gives herself a "pat on the back". Sue discovered that she has the motivation and discipline needed to learn this way and attain her goals. In distance education, Sue feels students are more responsible for their own learning. Because of this she had "more personal feelings of achievement", with her experience at Athabasca versus a traditional university.

Chris had very similar responses as Sue to her learning experience. What she learned about herself was that she had the determination needed to attain a goal. Working full time and successfully completing two courses, was very positive. Her sense of "accomplishment" came from this and the fact she was learning something, "using my brain and not just working". The experience met Chris's expectations. She found it "enjoyable and "it filled something I

needed at the time. I'm glad I took them and I don't feel they were a waste, even if they don't get me to some specific goal".

Lynn seemed to have difficulty discussing how her educational experience personally affected her, tending to talk around the subject. She had quite diverse feelings towards the courses she has taken. One course, in which she received negative feedback, she wanted to "trash and burn", for others it was a relief that they were over, and for a few, she would have liked to have learned more. When asked what she learned about herself, Lynn said that she could find short cuts to achieve her goal. But similar to Sue and Chris, Lynn became much more aware of the importance of self-motivation and because of this felt her experience with Athabasca was very positive. Lynn did offer one particularly reflective comment in discussing what she valued in a distance learning experience. Her response was "trust", that Athabasca University "trusts you and you in turn can trust them".

Neal also externalized the affects of the educational experience, generally feeling "relief" when he completed a course. For him the major impact of the experience was he became more aware that he was self-disciplined, and further developed his "organizational skills". He felt that he "learned some time-management skills in addition to what I already had" plus he gained "knowledge of administrative related topics from courses he was taking". He tended to focus on the skills he developed.

Bob saw the experience in a slightly different way. He discovered that he can "still learn" and to have confidence in his abilities to learn via distance. "It expanded my ideas and imagination about what I can do and where I can go". This has given him a feeling of "self satisfaction". He also said that he has become more aware of how much there is to learn and that he is committed to life long learning.

Gerald discovered that he is an "explorer", he "can not take something at face value" but needs to look at concepts from "all sorts of angles" and see how they can be applied and expanded. His experience with Athabasca University "sparked" his "thirst of learning again", something he had lost. With Gerald you get real sense of excitement about learning and that every course offers him opportunities to learn new ideas. The experience with Athabasca University has shown him "that life is a constant learning experience".

Similar to a number of the participants, Patti expressed a sense of "relief" when she successfully completed her first courses. When she initially began, Patti had concerns about keeping herself motivated and being able to learn via distance. She had been home with her children for a number of years and had begun to question herself. After the first course she felt much more confident in her abilities and she learned that "I did not have to be pushed my someone to get through the program and do a good job". Athabasca University provided Patti a way of gradually reintroducing herself to the university environment plus she proved to herself that she was still a competent individual. She found that her experience with Athabasca University her prepared for returning to a more conventional university, and that she did not feel she was at any disadvantage.

Elaine said she was on "cloud nine" after completing the first course. She had lost confidence in her ability to learn after being out of high school for twenty-five years. She found it encouraging "just to know that I could do a university course". Each course afterwards became easier, but it was a relief each time when she completed them. When asked how she has been affected by her experience with Athabasca University, Elaine responded enthusiastically that it had "really contributed to my well being". She grew up in a family who encouraged learning and the pursuit of personal goals, so she always had a desire to attend university. Elaine has proved to herself that she "can do it" and in fact would now be comfortable in a classroom environment. This has

given her a feeling of accomplishment. Through this experience she has gained "insight" into the importance of "life long learning".

Verna's experience with Athabasca University also had a very profound affect on her as an individual. The university's open admission policy, made it possible for Verna to obtain a university education.

"I know their logo this year was Learning Without Limits, I think that was very fitting because it gave me the opportunity to continue my education, and do something that I really wanted to do. It took away the obstacles that were standing there".

The experience has changed her life for the better. It has "filled me out as a person and given me something of my own to work towards". She has learned to appreciate and enjoy whole new fields of interest such as drama, towards which she previously had a "negative attitude". Beyond this she feels "more literate", able to participate fully in discussions. While it has altered how she sees herself, her self-esteem, it has also changed how her family views her. "I think it has given me more respect in their eyes". Verna has two sons in university, so she is able to discuss and relate to their experiences, as they can do her's. Through her experience, Verna has learned that she does have the determination to reach her educational goal. "I know that I will eventually get there. I have found that in myself". Verna has acquired new insights and knowledge through her learning experience, but it has also been a personally transformational experience.

The learners were affected in different ways by their learning experience, with most experiencing strong feelings of achievement and personal satisfaction. A few of the students felt that the experience had a more profound affect on their lives and how they viewed themselves. All the students felt that it was an very positive experience, one which had most of the elements of a quality

experience.

Emerging Themes

The first part of this chapter discussed data that came out of participants' discussions and reflections on their distance learning experiences. These data were then placed into three major categories: learner factors; the learning experience, processes and interactions; and learner's reflections on their experience. Under each of these categories are a number of related sub-categories. All participants did not necessarily have experiences within each of these categories but when looking across the data, a number of broad common themes emerged. An understanding of these themes provides insights into what influences the quality of a learning experience. These themes can be delineated as: the challenge of distance learning; learner responsibility and control of their learning; and personalized nature of the learners' experience. Each of these themes is described in some detail below.

Challenge of Distance Learning

The courses which these learners took from Athabasca University involved the reading and comprehension of a significant quantity of learning materials. Students found the sheer amount of reading and work required challenging, as exemplified by Verna 's and Patti's comments that if you did not enjoy learning via reading, a person would have considerable difficulty with these courses. Many participants expressed the opinion that courses from Athabasca University were more difficult than those from other institutions, they required more effort. This is due to a combination of the amount of material to be covered and the discipline needed to complete the coursework. All participants commented numerous times that to be successful in distance education, you must be well organized and have considerable self-discipline. If they did not establish a study schedule and attempt to keep to it, most learners found

themselves in difficulty. This could mean getting behind in their reading and assignments, having to ask for course extensions and on occasion not completing the course. Learners felt that they were ultimately responsible for getting their course work done.

Because of the challenge involved in distance learning, participants expressed very strong feelings of accomplishment or satisfaction when they successfully completed a course. It was a very positive experience for them knowing that they can learn this way and for many it increased their confidence in themselves and their abilities.

Learner Responsibility and Control of Their Learning

In discussing their experiences with Athabasca University, it became very clear that learners felt responsible for their own learning and wanted to control the way in which it occurred. This began with the participants all having specific reasons for attending the university. Most had educational goals related to vocational or career development needs but personal development goals also were of some significance. These goals meant that the learners knew where they were going and how they wanted to get there.

Their reasons for selecting Athabasca University and their expectations of the university demonstrate this. The primary factors involved in selecting distance learning was the flexibility and convenience it offered while allowing learners to attain their goals. They wanted to be able to set their own study schedule and work at their own pace. Most students had multiple responsibilities at home and work, so the ability to control their learning and the environment in which occurred was important to them.

As their familiarity with distance learning increased, they became more aware of

their own learning style and approaches that worked for them. This is reflected in their comments about their learning experience and their decisions to use the various support services offered by the university. An example of this is tutor support, with many students saying they contacted their tutor only when they needed them, although unsolicited calls from tutors were generally viewed as positive.

With wanting control over their own learning, learners also assumed responsibility for their learning. When it came to doing coursework, the university provided study guides which helped them organize their time and tutors would contact them occasionally. But as Gerald stated, nobody could do the work for them. As learners they had selected distance education because it fit their particular needs, but they also had to deal with the demands that came with this way of learning. They chose the number of courses they wanted to undertake, how much interaction they had with their tutors and their use of other services available from the university. Because they made the decisions about access, they also assumed responsibility for the consequences of these actions. This is shown in Bob's comments about overextending himself when he took two courses at the same time. Sometimes though, they were not fully aware of the effect of their choices but as a result did come to learn something. For example, Lynn chose to make limited use of study guides for many of the courses because she wanted to get the courses done as quickly as possible. Later upon reflection, she questioned whether this was the best approach to learning and in the end probably made things more difficult for herself.

Personalized Nature of Distance Learning

While students wanted to control and accept responsibility for their learning, there was a very strong sense that for them learning via distance was a more personalized experience compared to what they would get in a conventional

post-secondary institution. Their tutors knew them by name and students could talk to them when they wanted to. Many of the participants felt that they had established some rapport with their tutors and were able to engage in meaningful discussions and dialogue. They felt this would not be possible in large university classrooms. Verna and Elaine said that they would have been intimidated by large numbers of students and felt very comfortable learning via distance. Through the process, they developed more self confidence.

Besides the interactions with tutors, students also said that they received more feedback, both verbal and written, on assignments than what would occur elsewhere. Students found that constructive feedback was an integral part of the learning process. As learners they wanted to manage their own learning but through the services and support offered by the university, they could individualize their learning experience.

Learners related a number of times that if there was a problem the university seemed willing to listen and deal with it. A situation which could have been potentially negative, students came to consider as a positive. Both Sue and Elaine recounted instances in which the staff at the university seemed genuinely concerned with a problem they were encountering and acted on the situation. This gave them the feeling that the university values them as individuals and was willing to meet their needs. This ultimately affected the quality of their learning experience.

Characteristics of a Quality Learning Experience

In last section of this chapter, the characteristics of a quality distance learning experience within the context of this study will be defined. These characteristics are the essence of this study's findings and focus primarily on

the learner and how the institution supports the learner's experience. They include:

- The learner needs to have some sense of direction, goals that they are working towards which provides them with their motivation.
- The learner takes some ownership of the learning process. They assume some responsibility and control for their learning.
- The learner has some responsibility and is supported by the educational institution, in selecting the type and way learning is delivered.
- The learning methods, their delivery and support services must have the flexibility to respond to different types of learners and their needs.
- A major responsibility of administrative and support services is to identify and meet the needs of learners and be responsive to their concerns. This is particularly important for first time students.
- There is ready access and availability of tutor support, with the recognition of the primary importance of the learner-tutor relationship.
- The learning materials should be clearly written and laid out, with well developed study guides and appropriate supporting resources available. The materials should be current and up to date, incorporating new technologies and have appropriate depth of coverage for the course level.
- Learners must be provided opportunities in the learning process to engage in active learning, how to understand and apply learning.

- Opportunities should be built into the learning process to draw upon the learners experiences and relate the learning to these experiences.
- Constructive learner feedback and follow up must be built into the learning process.
- Assessment should mainly focus upon the development of the learners' ability to understand, analyze and apply concepts and ideas.
- A system must be in place to ensure that course and program credits are easily transferable to and from other post secondary institutions. Course levels should be coordinated with those of other post-secondary institutions.

These characteristics are a synthesis of the study data, and are based upon students who had primarily positive experiences with distance learning. They are concerned with the inputs, processes and outcomes of a quality learning experience. With regards to processes, what occurs during the learning experience has a major influence on learners' perceptions of quality.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND REFLECTIONS

Summary

The issue of quality in higher education and distance education has received increased emphasis in recent years due to the rate of social, technological and economic change. There has been considerable discussion and debate about "quality", but the literature shows that there is not a clear understanding of what it means. This is particularly true of distance education, where the focus has been primarily on various learning outcomes and technologies. What has received limited attention is the learner's perception of quality in relation to their learning experience. While the various stakeholders in education have alternative conceptions of quality, a true understanding and commitment to quality education, and in this case distance education, begins with the learner. The learner is an active partner in the learning process, not just the product of our educational systems. It is therefore the quality of the learner's experience and their subsequent development that will be examined in this study. To do this requires focusing on the learners' perception of a quality learning experience, that is what it means to them.

The research problem to be answered is "From the perspective of post-secondary distance learners, what are the characteristics of an ideal quality learning experience?" To further elaborate and develop this problem, a number of sub-questions were posed. In what way do learner factors and personal frames of reference influence the quality of the learning experience? How do institutional factors influence the quality of the learning experience? How do the interactions between the learner and the institution affect the quality of the learning experience?

A qualitative research methodology was selected as the most appropriate approach to examine learners' perceptions of quality. A semi-structured interview technique was used to collect the data. This meant asking broad, predetermined questions, ensuring that similar areas were discussed by all learners. The learner, through discussions and reflections on their experiences, were able to influence the direction of the interview. Nine students either currently enrolled or who have recently completed courses with Athabasca University and from a variety of disciplines participated in the study. Both urban and rural learners, with varying levels of experience with distance education, were involved. Study participants were randomly chosen from those who met the selection criteria.

Two interviews were held with each participant. The focus of the first interview was on obtaining an understanding of the learner's background and experiences, their experiences with distance learning and what affected it. In the second interview, the researcher was able to clarify and follow up on ideas that came out of the first interview, plus ask more indepth, reflective questions about their learning experience. The first interviews were approximately one hour in length, with the second ones being slightly shorter. All the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim and sent to participants for their validation and feedback. A research journal was also kept in which observations, reflections and insights were noted.

Data analysis took place in phases. It actually began before the interviews were completed, with a review of the first interviews for ideas to be checked, expanded and further elaborated on in the second interview. To assist in the analysis, a qualitative research data analysis computer program called "Sonar" was used. Prior to using the computer program, the researcher familiarized herself with the data and did some initial coding based upon topics discussed by participants. In reviewing the data, patterns began to emerge and

categories developed. These were then grouped into three larger categories that encompassed all aspects of the learner's experience with distance learning. The first major category describes the learner's' personal frames of reference and learner factors. This includes a brief portrait of each learner, their reasons for selecting to attend Athabasca University and expectations of the university. The second category focuses on the various processes and interactions of the learning experience. The primary areas here are student interactions with staff, of which the learner-tutor relationship is the most significant, interactions with learning materials, and assessment and feedback. The last major category is concerned with learner's reflections on their experiences, what they have learned about themselves and how they were affected. Within this the most important aspects are learner maturity, learners preferred ways of learning, and their personal learnings.

While not all participants had experiences within each category, further examination of the data revealed a number of underlying conceptual themes. These themes provide an understanding of what influences the quality of the learning experience. The first theme is the challenge of distance learning, in that the methods of learning in distance education required considerable learner motivation and self discipline. But because of this, learners also have a strong sense of accomplishment when successfully completing a course. The second theme concerns how learners assumed responsibility for their learning and wanted control of the way in which it occurs. The last theme is about the extent to which learners' felt that distance learning was of a personalized nature, that is it could be tailored to meet their needs as learners.

Out of the data and study findings, a number of characteristics of a quality learning experience could be synthesized, within the context of this study. These characteristics focus on the learner, the institution and their interactions. What they show is that the learning process, not just learning inputs and

outcomes, have a major impact on learners' perceptions of a quality learning experience.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study provide a better understanding, from the learner's perspective, of what a quality learning experience means to them. That is, what influences it and how they are affected by their educational experience. By being aware of how learners' characterize a quality learning experience, institutions can better understand how the programs, products and services that they deliver impact that experience. Learners in turn, can see that what they bring to their educational experience influences its quality.

The study findings have implications for the practice of distance education. These will be addressed from the perspective of the learner and the institution.

Implications for Learners

Learners in distance education have diverse educational backgrounds and experiences, as well as differing motivations and expectations for attending Athabasca University. This is reflected in their perceived needs as learners and how they view a quality learning experience. Athabasca University, based upon the perceptions of the students in this and other studies, has the ability to meet the learning needs of a variety of students. But to be successful requires students to understand both the possibilities and the challenges of distance learning. This means looking at ways that they can facilitate their own learning, beginning with having clearly established goals and objectives for themselves. As has been shown, learner motivation has a major influence on the learning experience. It provides them with the discipline and determination to meet the challenges they face. Verdun and Clark (1991) state that "from the learner's viewpoint, learning is a conscious effort to acquire new knowledge and skills

that lead to a personal goal of some sort" (p. 24).

Learners should be fully cognizant of what is entailed in learning via distance and determine if this method of learning is appropriate for them. Part of this involves learners assessing their own learning capabilities, that is their strengths and weakness, plus understanding the skills, such as time management, needed to be a successful distance learner. Students need to develop an awareness and take full advantage of the various support services and tools offered by the university and more importantly, access them when needed. This also means that when learners are having problems with their learning, they need to be willing to bring their concerns forward for discussion with the institution's staff members. This allows for changes to be made to ensure that the learner has a quality learning experience.

Implications for the Institution

While this study showed that learners want to have some control of their learning and need to assume some responsibility for it, institutions have a major influence on the student's experience. Educational institutions need to recognize the centrality of the learner in the educational process. The resources of the organization should be focused on providing the student with the best possible educational experience and enabling them to manage their own learning. This begins with having a clear understanding of who their students are, their motivations, needs as learners, and having products and services that have the flexibility to meet diverse learner needs. Wright (1987) using the ideas of Knowles provides some insight into adult learners, in that when they grow and mature: their self-concept moves from one of dependency to one of increasing self-directedness; they become an increasing reservoir of experience and thus a rich source of learning; their readiness to learn is increasingly the product of the developmental task required for the performing of their evolving

social roles; and adults have a problem-centred as opposed to subject oriented orientation to learning (p.3).

The participants in this study were generally very positive about their experiences with distance education as they felt that it was a more personalized experience than that found in a conventional university. Athabasca University should capitalize on this perception and look at ways to further develop it, as both the learner and the institution benefit. This is particularly relevant given that in the white paper "Adult Learning: Access through Innovation" (1994) it is proposed that Athabasca University, through partnerships with other institutions, play a key role in providing opportunities for students to complete regular and applied degree programs (p.19).

One area of consideration is the development of independent learners, viewed as one of the goals of distance education (Paul, 1990). But there appears to be a considerable amount of debate about the issue of independence in distance education particularly as it relates to concepts of control. Both Garrison (1989) and Moore (1990) see that there is an interrelationship between the two, in that independent learners assume responsibility for the overall control of the learning process, but should have access to and be provided support so that they do have control over their learning. The findings of Garland's (1994) study in distance education support this, where it was found that mature distance learners find conflict between the role of adult and student. Adults have high needs for respect, personal control and fulfilment and not meeting these needs can lead to withdrawal. So institutions must meet students needs for personal control by providing them with the appropriate resources and support they need to be self-efficacious. The issue of control and responsibility came through very clearly in this study, with students wanting control over their learning experience.

For Athabasca University this means being aware that students do want control over their learning but that they come to the institution with varying levels of self-directedness. This is often not reflected in the support provided them. Of particular concern are first time distance learners, who need to be identified and given the resources and supports needed to help them take control of their learning. Distance learning is seen as a "challenge" by most of the participants in this study, even though they tended to be highly motivated and disciplined individuals. While learners must have some degree of self-motivation, the institution can help them become successful distance learners. This in turn could positively affect the institution's drop out rate and decrease the degree of "challenge" faced by students.

In looking at some of the major influences on the learning experience, this study has shown that the tutor-learner relationship is the most significant. Although some students may not have contacted their tutors frequently or regularly, they indicated that they were glad to know that they were there when needed. They could call upon their expertise and knowledge. For most learners the support provided by the tutors and their interactions, was an integral part of their learning. It also was the human link between the learner and what could be an impersonal institution. St. Pierre (1990) in her review of distance education literature found that "most adult educators support the hypothesis that communication between the instructor and the learner is the most integral ingredient of correspondence study" (p.86).

While learners do want some degree of control over the support given, there are a number of things which the institution can do to facilitate the learner-tutor relationship. The first is for tutors at the beginning of a course to initiate the first contact. This could be via a letter then followed up by a phone call. Study participants said that they found it very positive when the tutor called them first and that it influenced how the relationship developed from there. What

developed is the result of the tutor's interpersonal communication skills, that is how effectively they communicated with the learner.

Another aspect of this, is importance of the tutor feedback on assignments and exams. It is a major communication tool between tutor and learner in that it impacts their relationship, as well as the quality of learning that occurs. Feedback should be constructive and helpful. If the tutor feels the student is having difficulties, they should follow up with them immediately rather than waiting for the student to call. Students who received what they felt was negative and unconstructive feedback, said that it negatively affected their learning experience. They were often reluctant to contact their tutors to get further clarification, choosing at times to distance themselves from their tutor. Holmberg (1981) considers feedback important for four reasons: discussion, explanation and enrichment, to communicate to students if they are on target with what is expected in the course, and to indicate if more review or practice of previous learning elements is needed. Students in this study reflected many of these same points when talking about feedback. St. Pierre (1990) states that feedback works best "when viewed as a people process" (p.85).

Because the tutor has such a major influence on the learning experience, tutor training at Athabasca University should be stressed. It should focus on the tutor's role, learner's perceptions, and ways to facilitate the learner-tutor relationship. Communication through discussion and dialogue, and feedback are important components of distance learning. They are integral to the quality of the experience.

In addition to tutor training, Athabasca University should examine tutor accessibility. All participants in this study expressed frustration at the inability to contact tutors when needed and suggested that this was an area for improvement. It was often difficult to get through to their tutors on scheduled

quiz days and when they encountered a problem in their studies, they often had to wait days to talk to their tutors. Learners felt that this interfered with the learning process. One suggestion, beyond increasing the amount of time tutors are available, was to use e-mail to contact tutors. It could also provide quick access and information, on common problems encountered in a particular course.

Related to this is the assignment of tutors, so that they do not change part way through a course. The exception is when the relationship is not working. Then the learner should be provided the opportunity to change tutors, which has occurred a number of times to students in this study. This demonstrates to learners that the university is willing to deal with their concerns and understands the importance of tutor support. This of course goes beyond tutor support, to include interactions with other university staff members, in particular front-line staff. Learners were generally very pleased with the way they were treated. When students had problems, the staff was willing to listen and respond. The ability to react to learners' needs has a positive affect on their learning experience, as well as how they view the university. Staff members should be aware of this and be provided any assistance or support they might need to continue to provide and improve "quality service" to students.

One of the more interesting things which emerged from this study was the interest by some of the participants in interacting with other learners. They felt it would be helpful to talk to other people going through similar experiences. The university offers only limited opportunities for learners to talk or meet and they should consider facilitating additional learner interaction.

The next major area of interactions which influenced students' learning is with the learning materials. Learners overall were very pleased with the quality of the materials. Because of the reliance on reading, the course materials need

to be clearly written and laid out. Careful attention should be paid to the selection of textbooks and the preparation by the university of course study guides. Course designers should also ensure that the amount of material or subject matter included in a course is appropriate for its level. One area of concern is with some of the courses not having up to date learning materials. This is particularly true of areas in which changes are occurring quite quickly, such as various technologies. The length of time in which courses remain current and relevant, is much shorter now. Courses need to be reviewed and updated on a more regular basis than is presently being done. One other area course developer should keep in mind, is that the examples discussed in the materials and the assignments should relate or draw upon the learner's experiences. Learners expressed many times the importance of being able to apply their learning to real life situations. To many of them that is what makes learning "relevant". This is supported by St. Pierre (1990) who notes that results of two studies show "that students wanted experiential learning incorporated into their courses and favoured the inclusion of more application exercises in their courses" (p.88).

In relation to course assessment, students mentioned the difficulty of the final exams. The university should provide the students with information on what to expect in these exams and how to prepare themselves. This would probably alleviate some of the pressure they feel when going into exams.

The last study implications concerns issues of course transferability and credibility. A number of the students in this study were taking courses through Athabasca University for credit towards a degree at another university. Students indicated that for some of the courses they took at Athabasca University they received credit for them at a lower course level when credit was transferred to another university. It seems that the issue of transferability is something that requires a coordinated effort between universities, to make it as

easy as possible for learners. This is in fact something the provincial government would like to address in their review of adult learning systems. The final topic concerns the perceived credibility of courses and degrees from Athabasca University. Some students indicated that in the beginning they had questions about the credibility and quality of the courses, wondering if they were at the same level as those of other post-secondary institutions. This changed once they had become involved with the university. Other students completing degrees at different universities, were left with the impression by teachers at those institutions, that Athabasca University courses were not of the same standards. Athabasca University must find some way to address these perceptions and develop strategies to show that they are in fact a credible institution that offers quality programs and courses.

Implications for Further Research

This study provided insight into nine learners' perceptions of a quality learning experience in post-secondary distance education. From the data, characteristics of a quality learning experience, within the context of this study, were developed. At the time that this study was undertaken, limited research had been conducted on quality in distance education, particularly from the learner's perspective. That which had been done tended to focus on specific aspects of distance education such as various learning methods or outcomes. Few took a holistic approach to studying the quality of the educational experience. While the results of this study are not generalizable, they do contribute to a better understanding of quality in distance education. Many of the proposed characteristics of a quality learning experience have similarities to the five broad criteria of quality in vocational education suggested by Muller and Funnell (1991). Both focus on the learner's central role in determining both the process and product of their learning. This study also found that student interactions with the institution, its products and staff has a major impact on the

learning experience. Research conducted by Viljoen, Holt and Petzall (1991) into students' perceptions of quality in an MBA program by distance education also showed that quality is the result of a series of complex interactions between the learner, educational products and staff. As for Athabasca University, the research results contribute to a better understanding of what students consider important to their learning. It also suggests various ways the institution's products and support services can be used to enhance the student's learning experience.

While this study does shed some light on quality in relation to learners with Athabasca University, it also raises a number of questions which has implications for further research. One particular area worth examining further is whether students' perceptions of quality change over time as suggested by Caffarella and O'Donnell (1991) in their study of quality self-directed learning. Do students' needs and definitions of quality change as they become more familiar with distance education? And what about students who have completed their degree, have their perceptions of quality changed from when they were a student? A longitudinal study which explores these questions could begin to answer some of these questions. In fact the Viljoen, Holt and Petzall (1991) study did use a longitudinal research approach to examine what students saw as quality in distance education and how to make their learning experience a quality one.

These studies usually focus on learners who have remained with the institution. The learners who participated in this study, though selected randomly, all had relatively positive educational experiences. As they had completed between two and fifteen courses with Athabasca University, one could consider them to be successful distance learners. They could be successful because they can adapt to the structures and processes offered by the university, rather than the university having the innovation and flexibility to meet their unique learner

needs. Therefore the perceptions of students who have withdrawn from the university, particularly as a result of a negative experience, should be explored in relation a quality learning experience. They may have very different needs and ways of defining quality.

Learner factors and personal frames of reference impact their perceptions of a quality learning experience. What needs to be explored further is if and how various learner characteristics, such as their multiple roles, previous educational and work experience and so forth, influences their experience. There is also no clear indication if urban and rural students have alternative conceptions of quality and what influences it, given that they often have different reason for selecting distance education. Distance education learners are not a heterogeneous group. Therefore a better understanding of how different types of learners define quality, would provide institutions a basis determining what types of products and services that can best fit diverse learner needs. Such a approach is supported by Granger (1990) in his discussion of bridging distances to the individual learner.

In this study, learners were not asked direct questions about quality and their learning experience. This was because it is often very difficult to define what quality means. Instead they were asked about what they value in a distance learning experience and what could be changed for them to have an "ideal" quality learning experience. But as the learners discussed and reflected upon their learning experience, they may have come to some clearer understanding of what in fact quality does mean to them. So maybe it would have been appropriate to ask such a question at this stage in the research process. Also, students had considerable difficulty in defining what "ideal" meant to them. They tended to be very realistic, focusing on what was already available rather than looking beyond to consider all possibilities. Therefore, in addition to conducting indepth interviews, it may be worthwhile exploring the issue of

quality further with students in structured focus groups or by conducting group interviews. Learners in such situations build upon each others ideas, stimulating them to think of different alternatives.

One particularly significant finding in this study is what could be called the personalized nature of distance learning. Students in describing their experiences felt that they had more interactions with their tutors, in one to one discussions, and received more individualized feedback than what would occurred in a conventional university. Perhaps it is less a "distance" experience than previously thought. The traditional definitions of distance education as noted in Keegan (1988), all indicate that one basic element is the separation between the teacher and student. But Moore as quoted in Granger (1990) poses the question that "should every distance education system make provision for some sort of personal support for each individual learner in an otherwise mass education system" (p.163). When looking at the literature, an article by St. Pierre (1990) noted how many of the distance educators such as Baath, Holmberg, Keegan and Rogers all indicate that distance education should foster a theme of "personalizing" its instruction (p. 81). This concept is certainly supported by the data in this study.

In this study it would seem that while teacher and student are physically separate, the relationship which develops between teacher and student is more personal than what occurs in large conventional university classrooms. This issue certainly needs further research, first to confirm what was found in this study and to do a comparison between student-teacher relationships in distance education versus traditional education.

As can be seen this study has raised a number of questions. Because of the limited amount of research on learners in distance education in relation to quality and the learning experience, there are many research possibilities worth

exploring. This study hopefully contributed to some better understanding of learner's perceptions of quality in distance education.

Personal Reflections

Having now completed my research, I would like to reflect upon my experiences as a researcher, what I learned through the process as well as what I learned from this study. Prior to the development of my research proposal, I was very interested in issues of quality in organizations and ways that it could be improved. My work at the time involved developing and planning educational and training programs for managers. I was always concerned about the type of learning experiences they had. When the opportunity arose to do research into quality in distance education, I felt that it should focus on the learner and their perceptions of quality. Athabasca University supported me in my approach, as they were also interested in issues of quality. This is why I chose to examine what a quality learning experience means to students in post-secondary distance education.

I had previous experience in developing and conducting research within organizations. What I found as I developed my research proposal and began data collection, is the amazing amount of work required of qualitative research. It can be a very time consuming approach. For me, one of the most positive aspects in doing this research was meeting and talking with the study participants. I found they were very interested in what I was doing and were more than willing to share both their time, feelings and thoughts with me. I felt that we both enjoyed our discussions and in some cases established a rapport between us. I gained new insights into myself, in my ability to communicate with people plus being able to see things from their perspective. As for the participants, most had not taken the time for personal reflection, so they found it

very positive to be able to review their educational experiences. They felt they learned something about themselves through the process, it gave them a better understanding of who they were.

In addition to learning some things about myself, I also developed some new skills through the process. This includes how to conduct a good interview, something which I got better at as I progressed through the data collection. With eighteen interviews I had considerable opportunity for practice. I had previously done individual counselling and consultation, which helped to some degree, but I had to change the way in which I followed up on students comments. Another major learning for me, was hold to use the qualitative software package "Sonar" to assist in the data analysis. I had never used it before, so prior to beginning data entry and analysis I had to become totally familiar with the program and its capabilities. In learning any new computer program, I encountered problems along the way and experienced a number of frustrations. I now feel that I have a thorough knowledge of how to use the program and its application. Through the process I have developed more confidence in my abilities as a researcher.

Many of the things the students discussed in relation to their educational experience, I could also relate to, particularly the degree of motivation needed to be successful and the importance of self discipline. Working primarily on your own doing research also requires considerable motivation and discipline. They talk about the loneliness of the distance learner, which could also be equated to the loneliness of the graduate researcher. While the students are not truly alone, as there are colleagues and staff members to talk to, responsibility for completing the research is wholly the student's responsibility.

Students in this study also talked about wanting to assume responsibility and control for their learning, as they had specific goals they were working towards.

I can see this reflected in my own approach to learning. My reason for pursuing my Master's in Education is related to some very strong personal and professional developments goals I have. But in working towards my degree, I also wanted to have control over how I reached that goal. In my previous work and educational experiences I preferred to assume responsibility and be in control of what occurs. Like the distance learners in this study, I like to be able to select those products and supports which best fit my needs as a learner.

While some studies on distance learners talk about their detachment from their learning (Conrad, 1991), I did not find this to be the case with most of the participants in this study. Certainly some of the participants have strong vocational goals, and seemed to focus on the outcomes. But when delved into further, feelings of accomplishment and a commitment to life long learning emerged. Many expressed a real enthusiasm towards learning, describing how positive their experiences with distance learning have been. They felt that they had learned a lot about themselves, gained self confidence and in some cases it had a major impact on their lives, changing it for the better. I certainly can relate to these students, as I have always have strong personal feelings about learning. I feel I have a real love of learning, both out of personal interest but also just for the sake of learning. I am truly committed to the concept of life long learning. To me life is a continuous learning process, something that is never finished.

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APPENDIX A

Quality Learning Experience Interview Guides

Introduction

The purpose of this interview is to get a better understanding of the student's perspective on quality in distance education. As someone who has been involved with Athabasca University, you are able to describe what it is like to take courses from them and what influences the quality of that experience. This interview is about your experiences with Athabasca University and your thoughts about your experiences.

The responses from all the people interviewed will be combined in the written report. Nothing you say will be identified to you personally. As we go through the interview, if you have any questions about why I am asking something, please feel free to ask. The interviews will be tape recorded. You can stop the tape at any time during the interview. The recorded interviews will be transcribed. You will receive a copy of this and be given an opportunity to review and provide comments. This is an important part of the validation process.

The purpose of the study is to get your insights about your educational experience. Please be as open and forthright as you can be. Your ideas, opinions, feelings and perceptions are important to this study.

Interview #1

Leamer Factors

The first thing I want to do is to get a better understanding of you and what is happening in your life.

1. Could you tell me about yourself before you became involved with Athabasca University?

- Probes:
- a) work experience
 - b) educational experience
 - c) personal and career goals

2. Tell me how you became involved with Athabasca University?

- Probes:
- a) reasons for attending
 - b) expectations
 - c) goals, specific objectives

Learning Experience

Now I'd like you to think about the courses you have taken and your involvement with Athabasca University.

1. Could you tell me about the courses you have taken and how they went?

- Probes:
- a) what happened during the courses
 - b) differences and similarities between courses
 - c) resources and support given: tutor support, learning materials
 - d) interactions you have had with staff from AU and also other students
 - e) what did assessment focus on
 - f) type of feedback received
 - g) what helped you learn best

2. How did you feel when you completed the first course? Where your expectations met?

3. Could you describe how you have been effected by your educational experience.

- Probes:
- a) how you personally as an individual have been affected
 - b) what have you learned about yourself

Interview #2

Evaluation/Opinions of Learning Experience

In this interview I will be asking your opinion about your learning experience.

1. Could you discuss an experience or situation in which you felt you really learned something?
2. Could you describe an incident or situation while attending Athabasca University which was particularly positive?
3. What about a situation or incident which was negative?
4. Let me ask you about your feelings.
 - a) What are some of the things you liked about attending Athabasca University?
 - b) Dislikes? What are some the things you didn't like about it?
5. Now that you have had an opportunity to reflect on your experiences, what things are of the greatest importance or of value to you in a distance education learning experience?
6. If you had the power, what would you change so that you could have the "ideal" or best possible educational experience?

APPENDIX B**Letter of Introduction.**

Dear

I am a graduate student at the University of Alberta and would like to invite you to participate in a research study I am doing. I thought that prior to telephoning you, I would provide you with some background information on the study. This research project is part of my Master's of Education and is supported by Athabasca University.

The purpose of the study is to determine what a quality learning experience means to students in post-secondary distance education. I want to find out how you, as a student of Athabasca University, define quality and what influences the quality of your educational or learning experience.

To do this, I plan to interview a number of students from Athabasca University. You will notice that I have enclosed with this letter a "Learner Profile". The profile, which asks some basic questions about your background and experience, will be used by me to help select students to participate in this study. I hope to include students who come from a variety of backgrounds. If you are interested in being involved in this study, please fill out the profile and return it to me. All the information you give will remain anonymous and confidential. Also, your participation in this research project is voluntary and you can drop out at any time.

I will be calling you within the next week about your interest in this study and discuss the project further. I look forward to meeting and talking with you. Your input is important to developing a better understanding of quality in distance education.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study or your part in it, please do not hesitate to discuss them with me. Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,

Giselle Gaboury-Smith
Graduate Student
University of Alberta

Phone: (403) 435-0356
Address: 2420 - 106 Street
Edmonton, Alberta T6J 4K5

APPENDIX C**Learner Profile**

If you are interested in participating in this study, please complete this Learner Profile. Names of participants will not be reported. Participation is voluntary and you can withdraw from the study at any time.

1. How many courses are you presently enrolled in at Athabasca University?

2. How many courses have you completed to date with Athabasca University?

3. What credentials do you intend to eventually achieve as a result of your educational activities? Please check one of the following.
 - a) no specific accreditation/none _____
 - b) a bachelor's degree from Athabasca University _____
 - c) a bachelor's degree from another university _____
 - d) a master's degree or doctorate _____
 - e) professional accreditation _____
4. Please specify the degree or area/field of interest that you are taking courses in _____

5. Do you live in a city or town that has a post-secondary education centre (AVC, college, technical school, university)?
Yes _____
No _____

6. What is your highest level of academic achievement?

- a) some high school _____
- b) Grade 12 or equivalent _____
- c) some college, technical or vocational school _____
- d) college/technical school certificate or diploma _____
- e) some university _____
- f) university degree _____
- g) graduate degree _____

7. What age group do you fall into?

- a) under 25 years _____
- b) 25 -29 years _____
- c) 30 - 39 years _____
- d) 40 - 49 years _____
- e) 50 years and over _____

8. Gender

Male _____
Female _____

9. Are you:

- a) Single/divorced/separated, no dependents _____
- b) Single/divorced/separated, with dependents _____
- c) Married, no children _____
- d) Married, with children _____

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Thank you for taking the time to complete this profile!

Please return it in the enclosed self-addressed envelope as soon as possible.

APPENDIX D**QUALITY LEARNING EXPERIENCE STUDY****Participant Agreement Form**

This study is being undertaken by Giselle Gaboury-Smith as part of her Master's of Education program at the University of Alberta. The study is supported by Athabasca University. The purpose of the study is to understand, from the student's perspective, what are the characteristics of a quality learning experience in post-secondary distance education. The information will be obtained through interviews with students of Athabasca University.

Names of participants will not be reported and information obtained in the study will be anonymous. Also, the names of individuals mentioned in the interviews will not be repeated in the written report. Participation in the study is voluntary, and participants can withdraw at any time. If are any questions or concerns at any time during the study, please contact Giselle Gaboury-Smith at 435-0356, or her thesis advisor, Dr. Dave Collett at 492-5621. If you are willing to participate in this study, please complete and sign the form as indicated below.

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Signed: _____

Dated: _____

APPENDIX E**Sample Transcript Validation Letter**

I enjoyed meeting and being able to talk to you about your experiences with Athabasca University. As I had mentioned to you previously, I am sending a transcript of the interview for your review. What I am interested in is the transcript's accuracy and if there are any comments, feedback or additions you would like to make. We will discuss this at the beginning of the second interview. Please don't concern yourself with grammar and sentence structure. Remember that this is a transcript of a conversation and so it will not look or read like something you have written. If I quote any portions of the interview in my report, I will make any needed grammatical etc. changes.

Your validation of the transcribed interview is both a welcome and necessary part of the research process. It helps to ensure the reliability of the study findings. I will be calling you this week to set up the second interview. If you have any questions or concerns, please give me a call at 435-0356.

I really appreciate the time and effort you have given to assist me with my research project. Thank you very much for your help.

Sincerely,

Giselle Gaboury-Smith